

**GEOGRAPHIES OF THE UNDERWORLD: THE POETICS OF CHTHONIC
EMBODIMENT AND GAME WORLDS**

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**GEOGRAPHIES OF THE UNDERWORLD: THE POETICS OF CHTHONIC
EMBODIMENT AND GAME WORLDS**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Curious Sympathy Between Underworlds and Video Games

Underworld. (un·der·world, n.) A region, realm, or dwelling place conceived to be below the surface of the earth; the world of the dead, located below the world of the living.¹

Video games exhibit significant underworld themes, values and references in their narratives, worlds, and representation. These chthonic elements have appeared in games across genres, settings, platforms, and target audiences over the course of video game history. This is more than casual borrowing by game developers for “window dressing.” I argue that the remarkable prevalence reflects a formal relationship between the underworld and video games; specific elements in underworld constructs comprise a poetics that resonates with video game worlds and affordances. Video games uniquely support the spatial, thematic, and narrative elements that characterize underworlds and the

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company. 2006

philosophical questions they engage. To quote one gamer, “You know, all these underworlds seem to have been crafted by the ancients to be good, challenging levels for a video game from the 21st century.”²

1.2. The Concept of Underworld

A concept of “underworld” runs through diverse cultures over the span of human history. At its heart, the underworld is a mythic territory where the dead abide, alongside chthonic gods or supernatural creatures. It is a place that is both self-contained and liminally connected to the material world of the living. A subterranean location is the most common, although some cultures conceptualize the house of the dead as being “beyond” the material world of the living in some other relative axis. Celtic cultures, for example, viewed hills and mounds as portals to the underworld, but the spirit world could also be entered “by crossing the waters” of the western sea.³

For this reason, some scholars, particularly those focusing on Celtic cultures, prefer the term “otherworld” when discussing these mytho-poetic places.⁴ It does

²(<http://www.tombrainerforums.com/showthread.php?s=6fd77712316d075216f04047b2615354&t=117241>)

³ MacColloch 105. A more recent example of this theme appears in Mike Newell’s 1992 film, *Into the West*, in which two Irish boys find a horse they think has come from Tír na nÓg, a spirit land similar to the Hellenic Elysian Fields.

⁴ See Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; Caroline Bynum,

have the advantage of being spatially agnostic while also emphasizing the liminality of the places. But it loses much in its amorphic vagueness. I use “underworld” because it expresses the distinct orientation - and thus geographical relationship typical to spirit worlds that “otherworld” fails to convey. Budge followed the “underworld” convention when writing about Tuat, the Egyptian land of the dead.⁵ Furthermore, it is the common term used when discussing the land of the dead in other media, such as the large bodies of work in film and literary criticism. Using underworld when discussing similar ideas in video games and digital media facilitates comparison and discussion with other art and media discourses. Underworld has greater awareness in lay and gaming circles, as well.⁶ Underworld is the more productive term within the specific context of *World of Warcraft*. Both the undead and the dwarves have subterranean cities, but it is the capital of the dead, “Undercity,” that is associated with the mythological underworld.

Manifestations of this mythic territory in different cultures often share several key characteristics, despite the cultures’ varied and separate traditions: a distinct spatial geography, embodied experience (even for the dead), and narratives of

The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

⁵ E. A. Budge, *Egyptian Heaven and Hell*. p. 88.

⁶ Comments on a *Tomb Raider: Underworld* forum thread revealed strong interest in and familiarity with the concept of underworld (“Underworld is more about spirits, another realm”) as well as specific example of underworld in different cultures. (<http://www.tombraiderforums.com/showthread.php?s=6fd77712316d075216f04047b2615354&t=117241>)

journey and challenge, in a world that is bound by logic and rules peculiar to that place. Diyu, the underworld in Buddhism and Chinese popular religion, is a subterranean land organized into a series of courts, through which souls are processed and judged before being sent on to suffer purgative torture.⁷ The ancient Egyptian underworld mirrored the world of the living as a “valley in the sky,” in which souls had to pass twelve gates of judgment and the soul-eating beast Ammit in order to reach paradise; those who failed faced eternal torment.⁸ Xibalba, the underworld from classical Mayan myth, was a land of darkness and pain associated with rivers and the subterranean cave systems that wind underneath Central America (figures 1-3).⁹ The commonalities among these different mythological places make it possible to generalize certain characteristics as chthonic for descriptive and analytical purposes. Chthonic poetics thus involves embodied experiences of journey and challenge through landscapes that have spiritual and spatial geography.

⁷ Stephen F. Teiser, “‘Having Once Died and Returned to Life’: Representations of Hell in Medieval China,” *Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, no. 2 (1988): 435–37.

⁸ E. A. Budge. *Egyptian Heaven and Hell*. p. 86-89; Miriam Van Scott. *Encyclopedia of Hell*. New York: Macmillian, 1998. p. 102-103.

⁹ Robert J. Sharer, Sylvanus Griswold Morley. *The Ancient Maya*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. pp. 181-183, 270, 280, 522.



Figure 1. Rio Frio cave system in Belize. The caves were linked to Xibalba, the underworld in classical Mayan mythology.



Figure 2. Entrance to Actun Tunichil Muknal, a Maya archaeological site in the Cayo District, Belize. Actun Tunichil Muknal was ritually and mythologically connected to Xibalba



Figure 3. Crystallized human remains within the Actun Tunichil Muknal site.

The underworld trope has inspired works and discussion in many media. Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) painted fantastic landscapes with grotesque depictions of bird-headed demons inflicting physical torments on the bodies of the damned. Auguste Rodin took the Inferno for the subject of his epic *La Porte de l'Enfer* (figure 4). Jean Cocteau's Orphic trilogy, in particular *Orphée* (1950), adapts the myth of Orpheus' descent into the underworld to the director's contemporary Paris, while Guillermo del Toro's more recent *El laberinto del fauno* (2006) weaves an underworld descent narrative throughout a tale of the conflict during the Spanish Civil War. The underworld has appeared often in literature from classical works, the best known being Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Underworld narratives informed much of medieval literature, the themes and motifs crystallizing in Dante's late medieval *Divine Comedy*, while Renaissance authors like Spenser used the underworld for structural as well as thematic purposes.¹⁰ In modern literature, underworld tropes appear in writers as diverse as A. Checkov, Kathy Acker, Salman Rushdie and C.S. Lewis.

¹⁰ Matthew A. Fike. Spenser's Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene Studies in Renaissance Literature, V. 24, 2003.



Figure 4. Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell* (1880-1890) depicts the Inferno from Dante's *Commedia*.

1. 4 The Historic Prevalence of the Underworld in Video Games

The underworld's influence, however, has been remarkably pervasive in games when compared to these legacy media. Underworld themes, imagery and references have saturated video games throughout their history. There has been relatively little scholarly inquiry, however, into underworlds and video games.

This lacuna is striking, particularly when we consider the attention that underworld has received in other disciplines and media; there is an established scholarly discourse of underworld studies in film (Martin M. Winkler 2001), drama (June Schlueter 1990), literature (David Pike 1997; Rachel Falconer 2001), and fine art (Evans Lansing Smith 1995, 2001, 2003).

The influence of the underworld in games spans genres, target audiences, Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) content ratings, developers, cultures, platforms and time periods. The range of underworld references is also broad, with game developers using themes from the underworlds of other cultures. We find underworld elements from Asian cultures as well as from the Western tradition, and motifs from different cultures are often combined within a given title.

Kid Icarus (Nintendo, 1986) is a vertical-scrolling 2D platform game developed in Japan for the Nintendo Entertainment System.¹¹ The game world and narrative combine ancient Greek and Christian elements, including an angelic player character who must escape from the underworld ruled by Medusa (figure 5).



Figure 5. *Kid Icarus* (1986) for the NES.

¹¹ NES in the US, but known as the Famicom in Japan.

The *Megami Tensei*, or “Megaten”, games (Atlus, 1987-2008), also developed in Japan, are a long-running franchise that pulls from mythological traditions that span many time periods and cultures. The series has spawned over fifty titles on mobile, console and computer platforms. Most of the games fall into the role-playing genre, although the franchise also includes titles in the adventure, puzzle, strategy and collectable card genres. The underworld connections are explicit, and game play and plots revolve around supernatural entities and places taken from a variety of time periods and cultures.

The Megaten game *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne* (2004) takes place in an underworld that temporarily replaces the material world following an apocalypse (figures 11-13). The liminality of the player character is expressed in corporeal terms, as he has become part demon as part of this transition. The gameplay of this RPG consists of negotiating with demons as well as fighting, a device that recalls underworld descent narratives like Orpheus’ petition to Persephone for the release of Eurydice.

While some gamers may see underworld themes as just a backdrop for next-generation graphics or interesting game mechanics, others find expressive power intrinsic to the underworld elements. The fan-produced Megaten wiki lists over twenty mythological systems from which the games’ NPCs and opponents

originated.¹² Collecting the detailed, cross-referenced content on the site required a significant investment of time and reflects a sizable gamer population that embraces the chthonic elements for their cultural and mythological value, not just for surface aesthetic appeal. What draws these gamers is not the imagery so much as the richness of the mythic underworlds that underpin it. They value and respond to the narratives, creatures, gods, heroes and places that form chthonic landscapes.

We see this attitude appear in the social discourse among gamers anticipating 2008's installment of the Tomb Raider franchise, *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. Gamers in forum discussions about the game repeatedly expressed hope that the game would delve into the expressive potential of the underworld connection.

“The three greatest Underworlds ever imagined by the Ancients were the Egyptian Duat, the Greek Hades, and the Mayan Xibalba. It would be a really big mistake if CD [developer Crystal Dynamics] don't include all three of these in a game entitled 'Tomb Raider Underworld'. “

¹² The authoritative Megaten wiki aggregates game data from the breadth of the franchise. I've found the information to be reliable based on my experience with the multiple Megaten games I've played.
http://www.popanime.net/megami/wiki/index.php?title=Demonic_Compendium

“... i would like to see perhps (sic) a more powerful pre-Hellenic deity such as Dione who was a titaness theirs is a lot the could do if they go back to the pure untainted mythologies”

“As much as I love Hades and Duat I don't want Tomb Raider to overuse Egypt and Greece... I think we should broaden our horizons a bit. There are just as many underworlds out there that are just as complicated if not more.”¹³

Eric Lindstrom, creative director for the game, has commented on the deep pull that underworlds have in video games. "A common theme that runs through the whole adventure and the mythologies [game protagonist Lara Croft] delves into are the Underworld myths of those ancient cultures." He explained that the game's title expresses "more about the object of her quest " and has "less to do with wandering underground settings."¹⁴ One gamer speculated:

“What if TombRaider Underworld is a spiritual trip for Lara ... the player has to continue through the game only to find out that the whole game is nothing more but a near death experience as she is on a spiritual trip to

¹³(<http://www.tombraiderforums.com/showthread.php?s=6fd77712316d075216f04047b2615354&t=117241>)

¹⁴ *GameInformer*, January 2008. "Tomb Raider: Underworld – The Next Logical Step," pp. 66-7.

find her soul back to come back from the underworld by going through several test to show the will to survive. I would love to see this happen”¹⁵

The underworld setting is useful for creating interesting game environments, but these statements show that players also respond enthusiastically to the mythopoetic chthonic structures and themes in games.

The underworld presence permeates video games with little differentiation for audience. It emerges in games with a wide range of budgets, with varied intended players and ratings, in games of different genres, and in games from developers across the publishing spectrum. It appears in games from first-party (console maker-owned) “AAA” console titles to budget PC and independently developed games.

Beyond Atlantis is an adventure game from third-party developer Cryo Interactive, published by The Adventure Company in 2000 as a PC value title. This mid-market game features the classical Mayan underworld Xibalba as one of its game world levels (figure 7). *Folklore* (Sony, 2007) for the Playstation3 is a single-player, action-adventure RPG. This “AAA” (or big budget, high profile) game bases its setting, the “Netherworld,” on the underworld of Celtic mythology (figures 8-9). At the other end of the game industry spectrum, independent

¹⁵<http://www.tombraiderforums.com/showthread.php?s=af8070dcfe2a45dd679be551dd1b9b25&t=116810>

Christian game developer Marty Bee's *Xibalba* draws on the Mayan underworld for its name as well as the setting for one of his self-published religious survival-shooter games.¹⁶

Nor is a game's intended player age a limiting factor, as underworld elements appear in games across ESRB ratings. *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne* received an M (Mature, or For Over 18 Years) rating, while *Beyond Atlantis* received an E (For Everyone). *Folklore* carries a T (Teen, or For 13 and Up). So does the LucasArts classic PC adventure game, *Grim Fandango* (1998), which takes place in a richly evocative underworld derived from Mexican mythology and folk traditions (figure 10).

1.5 Inferno: One Underworld's Video Game History

Looking at the distribution of games that feature a specific underworld demonstrates the commonality of chthonic elements across game genres discussed above. The Inferno from Dante's *Commedia* has inspired art for hundreds of years, and this underworld has a notable history in video games. The most literal interpretation comes from Denton Designs' 1986 title *Dante's*

¹⁶ "Xibalba is a FPS that is 'all about UFOs and what the Bible actually says and what the agenda of the UFO entities is' and is based on actual research on UFOs in the Bible. You investigate a Pagan temple in Mexico in search of Dr. Alonzo, who has disappeared. This is an exciting action adventure that will teach you much about the demonic nature of UFOs." Marty Bee, interview on Christian gaming site Zounds (<http://objectiveministries.org/zounds/gaming.html>). The *Xibalba* game also makes a connection between subterranean civilizations, the demonic underworld and Antarctica, placing it in a narrative tradition shared by weird fiction short stories such as Lovecraft's "In the Mountains of Madness" and Poe's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym."

Inferno (figures 17-20). This 2D scrolling game for the Commodore 64 personal computer system follows the narrative of Dante's poem as well as using its geography as the game world. The player takes on the role of the Pilgrim and must travel alone through the nine circles of Hell within seven game days. The way is filled with peril and hostile creatures, and the player has only one life (unlike the conventional three lives common to the genre). The game's notorious difficulty also arose from there being no save points in the original version.

In Crave Entertainment's *The Lost* (2002), "the setting, characters, and storytelling techniques" used throughout the game come directly from Dante's *Inferno* (figures 14-16).¹⁷ This third person shooter/survival horror game began as a AAA title for Playstation2. The game underwent multiple revisions, the last as a budget title, before being cancelled in 2002 due to the developer's legal and financial difficulties. (The game was complete, and Indian developer FXLabs purchased and released it in India as a PC game under the title *Agni: Queen of Darkness*.)¹⁸ *The Lost's* narrative deviates from Dante's text, replacing the Pilgrim's journey with a single-mother's quest to recover the soul of her dead child, Beatrice, from the grasp of Hell. The representation of the characters and environments of the *Inferno* also veers away from the original text. The development team "modernized Hell quite a bit" by exchanging features of the

¹⁷ Gamespot.com preview. March 4, 2002.

<http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/adventure/lost/news.html?sid=2855948>.

¹⁸ (http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2008/03/irrationals_the_lost_turns_up.php).

poem with elements from modern history.¹⁹ Cerberus has the heads of three human infants, rather than of dogs. The seventh circle, housing the violent damned, manifests as a World War II battleground, while the River Styx is replaced by railcars reminiscent of the trains used to transport Holocaust victims to concentration camps. The Forest of Suicides becomes an insane asylum.²⁰ Development team members Ken Levine and Henry Smith explained in an interview:

Ken: Well, you're a despondent person who's lost someone named Beatrice. There's nine circles. Different monsters in each circle. Lots of cool weapons and scary stuff, not so much Renaissance Italian politics.

Henry: The original Inferno didn't have nearly enough cool weapons...

Ken: Yes, Dante clearly never played Turok.

The “modernization” of Dante’s underworld in *The Lost* recalls the poet’s strategy of filling his Inferno with the souls of his contemporaries. In Dante’s case, this made his poem immediately relevant to his audience. *The Lost* attempts to connect with its gamer audience by replacing elements of Inferno with set pieces from the survival horror genre while retaining the structure and narrative of Dante’s underworld.

Capcom’s best-selling *Devil May Cry* franchise (2001-2008) uses the Inferno as part of a larger body of chthonic material that supports the game’s narrative and

¹⁹ Crave developers, in IGN.com interview. May 19, 2001.
<http://ps2.ign.com/articles/095/095067p1.html>

²⁰ GameSpy.com preview. <http://archive.gamespy.com/previews/january02/thelostps2/index.shtm>

environmental structure. The original game in the flagship series established the new genre of “extreme action,” in which fast-paced twitch response dominates the gameplay in a frenetic barrage of fluid movement and violence. The protagonist, Dante, and his twin brother and antagonist, Virgil, are half-human, half-demon. Dante thrives on challenge and repeatedly travels to chthonic realms to combat demonic forces intent on destroying humanity for the sake of power. The narrative is “a traditional story of a hero”, according to game director Hideki Kamiya.²¹

“When I changed the game's world setting to a demon world, I took traditional fantasy monsters and tried to alter them so they would fit into the world of Devil May Cry. What if I were to transform those traditional monsters ... so they can fight against the super powerful devil hunter Dante? ... When designing monsters, I tried not to let the traditional concepts of the demon worlds restrain my imagination. My policy was: "Anything that looks cool is acceptable."

Kamiya purposefully placed the game narrative and setting in the chthonic framework of a demon world, but like the developers for *The Lost* he guided the visual representation to appeal to the aesthetics of his contemporary audience.

These games drawing on the Inferno are a heterogeneous body of work. They represent an array of different genres, platforms, and time periods. What unites

²¹ Interview with CVG. <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=17957>

them is their expressive use of the Inferno for narrative and environmental material. The visual representation may in fact be altered beyond recognition while the chthonic framework remains generally intact, as this group of Inferno-inspired games demonstrates. The value comes from the structural elements of the underworld rather than its representational or visual layer.

1.6 The Underworld's Home in Video Games

Clearly, there are factors that have made video games a comfortable home for the underworld in the digital age. Underworld elements manifest so frequently in video games, in fact, as to make their presence normative. The scenario presented in id Software's 1993 game *Doom* includes a human research base on Mars being overrun by demons from Hell (figures 22-23). The gamer's response when faced with this unlikely turn of events is not "Why does this video game have demons running around Mars?" but rather, "Of course there are demons running around on Mars! It's a video game."

The breadth of games in which chthonic elements appear and the frequency with which they occur indicate that the underworld has a strong affinity with video games and gamers. From the perspective of game creators, the underworld connection enables them to leverage mytho-poetic traditions whose narrative structure complements video game design goals. Gamers, in turn, recognize underworld elements and appreciate their expressive power.



Figure 6. Detail of Xibalba's Lords of the Death from the *Popul Vuh*, the Mayan sacred text.



Figure 7. *Beyond Atlantis* (2000) from Cryo Interactive uses Xibalba as one of its locations.

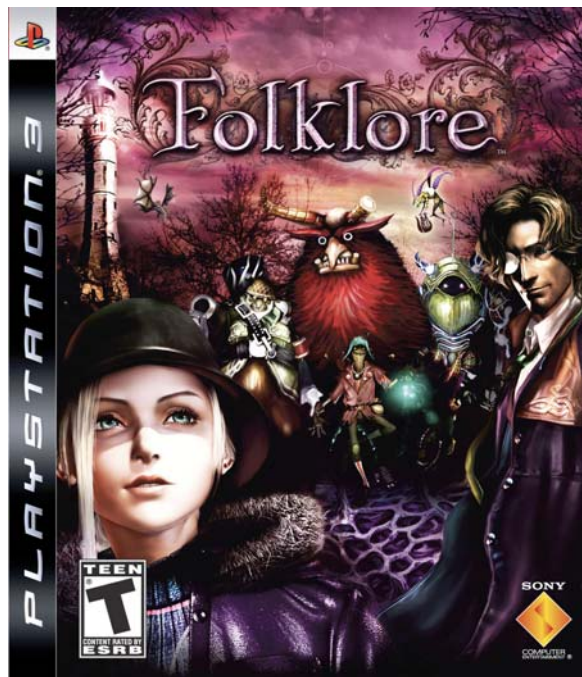


Figure 8. *Folklore* (Sony, 2007). This game takes place in the “Otherworld,” a Celtic underworld.



Figure 9. *Folklore*. The menhir (standing stones) are a gate to the underworld.



Figure 10. *Grim Fandango* (Lucas Arts, 1998). This landmark adventure game set a film noir-style story in a world based on Mexican folklore and the Day of the Dead.



Figure 11. *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne* box art (North American release). The game was released in Europe as “Lucifer’s Call.”



Figure 12. *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*. Underworld elements appear in the structure, gameplay and content of the “Megaten” game franchise. The character “Dante,” from the *Devil May Cry* game series, makes a cameo appearance in SMTN. In the *Devil May Cry* universe, Dante is a demon hunter with a demonic twin brother, Virgil.



Figure 13. *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*. The Labyrinth of Amala contained 5 kalpas, or levels. Lucifer (who appears in the game either as an old man accompanied by a young woman, as above, or as a boy accompanied by an old woman) resides in the lowest level.

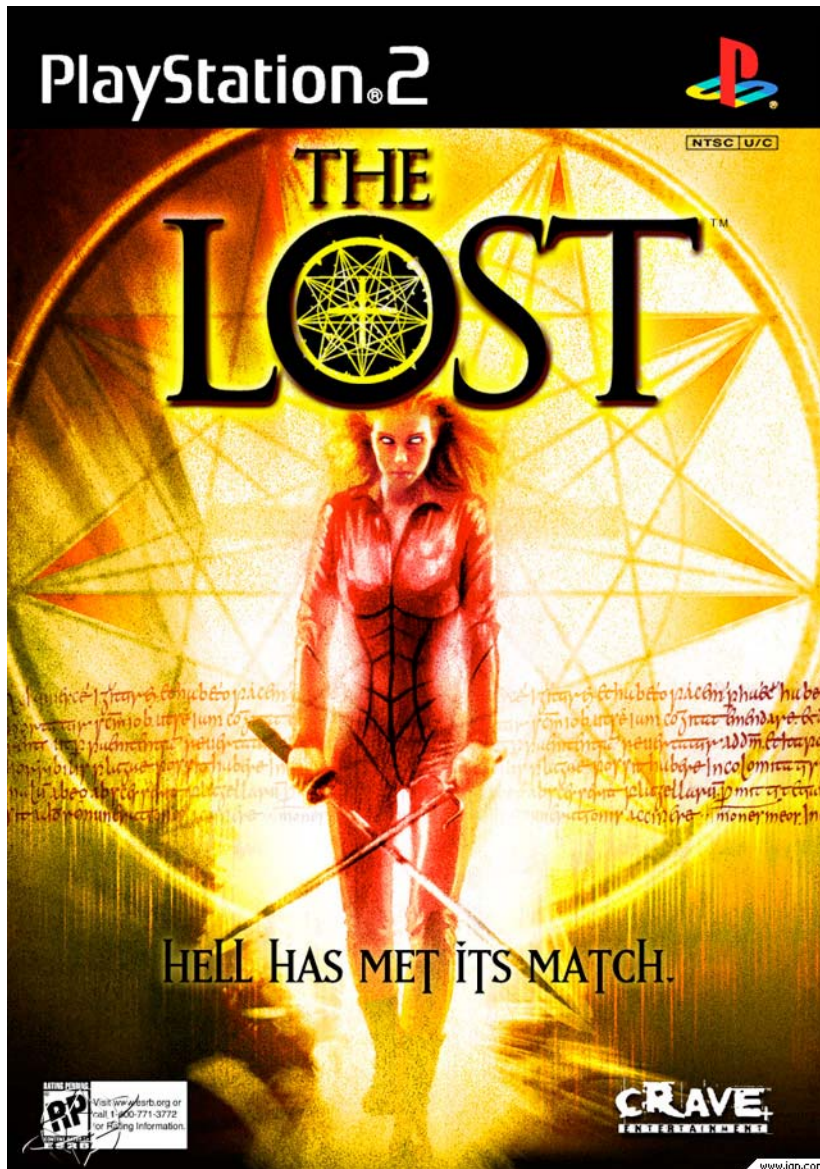


Figure 14. *The Lost* (Crave Entertainment, 2002 unreleased) game for Playstation2. The player takes the role of a young single mother on a quest to retrieve her daughter's soul from Hell; the game was based on Dante's *Inferno*.



Figure 15. *The Lost* (Crave Entertainment, 2002 unreleased) game for Playstation2. Iconic figures from *Inferno* (and classical mythology) were re-imagined in the survival-horror aesthetic. Here, Cerberus confronts the player.



Figure 16. *The Lost* (Crave Entertainment, 2002 unreleased) game for Playstation2. The geography of Hell was also translated into the survival-horror aesthetic. Here, the River Styx has become a World War II-era train.



Figure 17. *Dante's Inferno* (Denton Designs, 1986) game for Commodore 64. The player controls the Pilgrim (without Virgil) through the nine circles of Dante's Inferno. The game is infamously difficult, as the player only has one life and the game originally did not have save points.



Figure 18. *Dante's Inferno*. Charon ferries the Pilgrim across the River Acheron. This scene is not actually depicted in the poem, as Dante the Pilgrim faints after they leave the shore. The poem's action recommences after they've reached the first circle on the other side of the river.



Figure 19. *Dante's Inferno*. Phlegyas ferrys the Pilgrim over the River Styx.

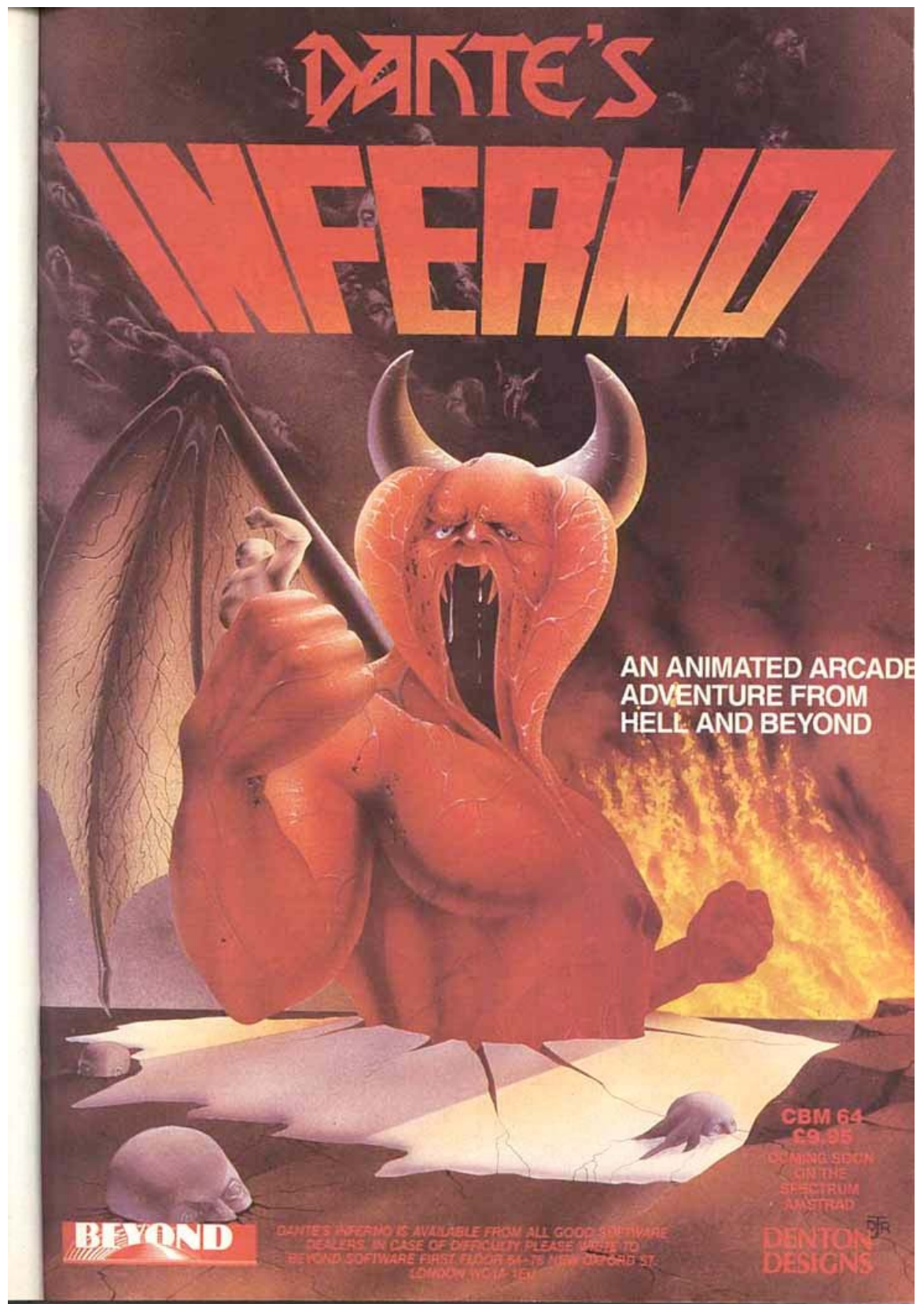


Figure 20. *Dante's Inferno*, advertisement.



DANTE'S INFERNO

Beyond, £9.95 cass, joystick or keys

I am the way into the doleful city,
I am the way into eternal grief,
I am the way into forsaken race,
Justice it was that moved my great creator:
Divine omnipotence created me,
and highest wisdom joined with primal love,
Before me nothing but eternal things were made,
And I shall last eternally,
Abandon every hope, all ye who enter.

So begins Dante Alighieri's rather doleful poem *Inferno*, the tale of a pilgrim's journey through hell to Mount Purgatory on the

game if you are to succeed in this task.
The adventure begins in the woods outside the cavernous portal of hell. After searching the



OBJECTS	DAY	SCORE	HIScore
	1	1150	1750



OBJECTS	DAY	SCORE	HIScore
	1	1200	1200

other side of the world. Not the fettle for a computer game you may think, but using the story as the basis for a plot, Denton Designs have produced what must the first computer game-of-the-poem.

The game takes the form of an arcade adventure in which you

woods for any useful objects, the pilgrim must walk through the gates of hell and begin his adventure proper. The gates of hell lead straight into limbo, a bare and blasted land patrolled by hornets.

I'm not overly impressed with this latest offering from Denton Designs. The gameplay and concept isn't exactly innovative, but like any 'trundle round exploring and solve a few puzzles' game there's quite a bit to keep you going. Ten quid is a high price to pay for a few pretty graphics and some interesting sounds.

If the pilgrim remains there too long, the hornets will seek him out and sting him to death.

The pilgrim can only escape from limbo by crossing the river Styx. But the cold water kills any living thing on contact, so what is the pilgrim to do? Perhaps Charon, ferryman of the river, can be persuaded to take him across in his boat...



OBJECTS	DAY	SCORE	HIScore
	1	1250	1200

must guide the pilgrim through limbo and the nine circles of hell to confront Lucifer, the root of all evil. You only have seven game days to

complete this task — take too long and you will remain damned for all eternity...

All action takes place in a scrolling window, with the pilgrim appearing in the middle of the screen. The pilgrim can be moved up, down, left or right and also made to pick up or drop objects — an action which needs to be taken at regular intervals during the



The storyline to this game is certainly weird, but very original nevertheless.

The format of the game itself isn't original though, it's just a pretty simple arcade adventure cum collect-the-objects-and-use-em up. The graphics are quite reasonable and portray the action nicely, and the spot effects and music are fine. Sadly, the game is lacking any real sparkle or nailbiting action. Ardent arcade adventurers might find it fun, but I didn't.

Across the river lies the first circle of hell, the place where virtuous non-Christians are sent. An evil whip-wielding demon patrols this area and tries to track the pilgrim down. The demon's touch is death, so he is best avoided.

Passing through circle two you must dodge the lustful who are eternally blown around by a hurricane. If the pilgrim is unlucky enough to touch the lustful, he becomes one of them and the game ends. As you progress through the other seven levels you will meet such horrors as Medusa, the slothful, the gluttons, the wrathful, and finally Beelzebub himself.

PRESENTATION 79%
Informative instructions, good title screen and pleasant enough in-game presentation.

GRAPHICS 77%
Imaginative sprites but bland backdrops.

SOUND 68%
A reasonable ditty plays throughout.

HOOKABILITY 78%
The puzzles are quite straightforward and so is the objective.

LASTABILITY 68%
Nine 'circles' of hell to get through in seven days.

VALUE 60%
An expensive journey to hell.

OVERALL 66%
Nothing special — look before you leap.

Figure 21. *Dante's Inferno*, review in December 1986 issue of *ZZAP!64* magazine.



Figure 22. *Doom II*, advertisement. Mars and its moons become an off-world underworld.

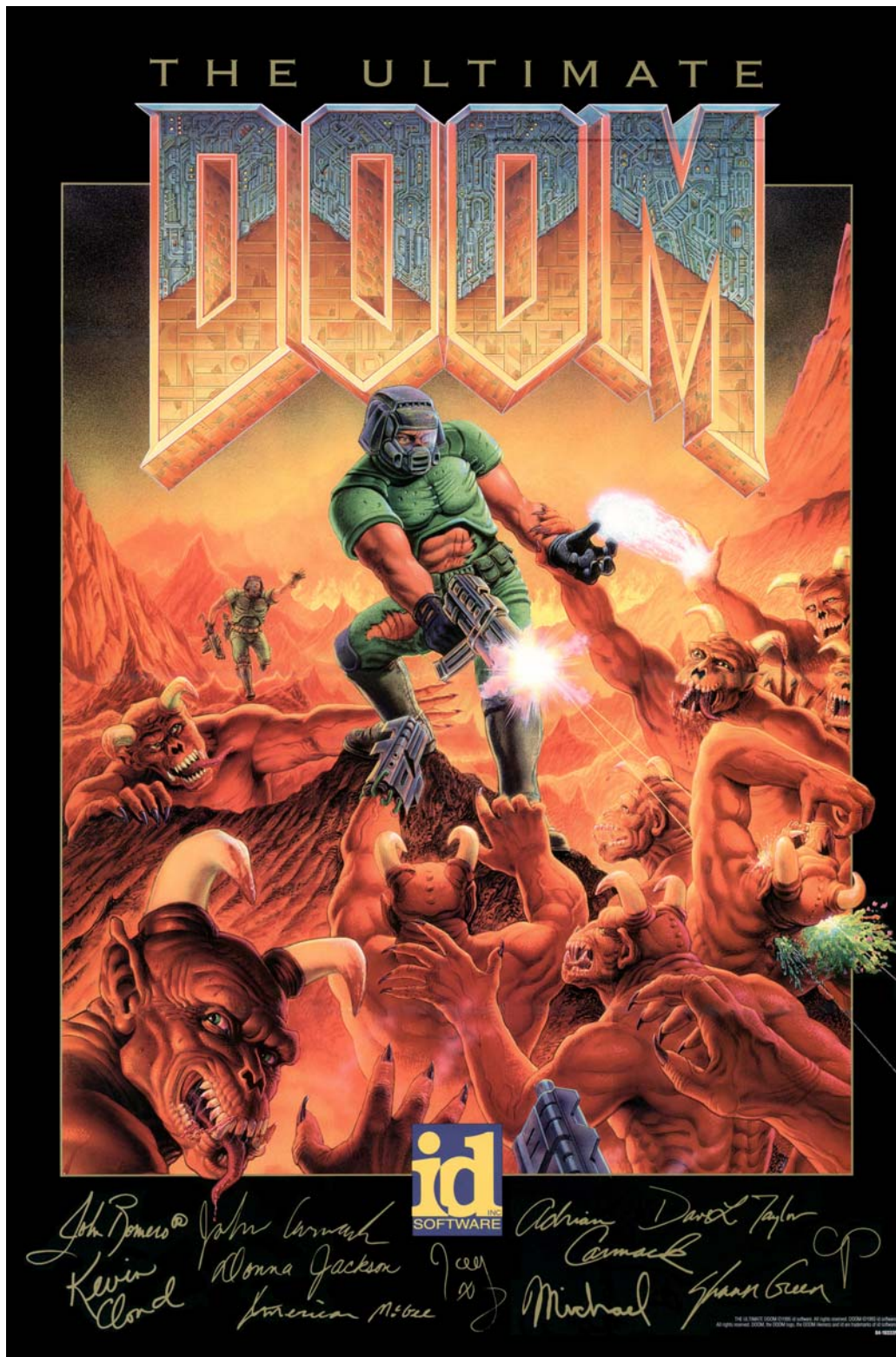


Figure 23. *The Ultimate Doom*, promotional poster.

1.7 Poetics: Chthonic Perspectives and Definitions

“Poetics” can express a prescriptive directive, not unlike a manual or a “best practices” guide, which is the route Antoniades takes. His *Poetics of Architecture* attempts to bridge the philosophical gulf and practical differences between modernist and postmodern schools of architecture.²² He uses abundant charts and diagrams to establish relationships between elements of site and interpretation and form. The clarity of such an approach certainly has a seductive quality, but a “best practices” guide to the underworld is not productive when examining extant mytho-poetic spaces.²³ What we need first is a critical framework for examining the mature mytho-poetic spaces that continue to influence media rather than a manual for building new underworlds.

One path to understanding the formal relationship between underworlds and video games is through a poetics of underworld. By looking at traditional examples, we identify what essential characteristics are common across underworlds. I use poetics in the chthonic context to describe rule sets, aesthetics, and attributes of the underworld as a way to define structural,

²² Antoniades, Anthony C.. *Poetics of Architecture: Theory of Design*. New York: Wiley, 1992.

²³ Should one find oneself in the position to make a new underworld, the “best practices” approach might be quite useful. In that circumstance, I would recommend starting with “The Devil Made Texas,” a traditional cowboy song from the American West that recounts the difficulties such projects can entail. “He neither complained nor did he groan, but decided he’d start up a hell of his own, where he could torment the souls of men without being shut in a prison pen.” Collected in Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1994. p. 398.

phenomenological and functional principles of virtual worlds. This helps us recognize what differentiates a mytho-poetic space as “chthonic.” It also provides a guide for our investigation of video games and gives us a comparative framework for evaluating chthonic elements in them.

1.8 Chthonic Embodiment: Perspectives and Definitions

I engage embodiment as the perceptual threshold created by the abilities and limitations of the body in space. Growing from this perspective are the metaphors, conventions, representations and modeling of the body in a broader chthonic context. I am interested in ways a person acts, interacts, is acted upon, represented, and is perceived in the underworld. To borrow a phrase from geographer David Sopher, how do souls occupy and shape the landscape in which they dwell, as they are also shaped by that landscape?²⁴

One of the striking features shared by diverse underworlds is the ubiquitous body. Living people traveling through the underworld, like Orpheus or Dante, retain their physical form and sensations. But the souls of deceased mortals and the supernatural or divine creatures that exist in these spirit realms have bodies, too. What might be ephemeral in the human world, such as souls or demons, is tangible and embodied in the underworld. In a chthonic context, then, “body” is a

²⁴ Sopher, vii

common reference point for the mortal and divine, living and dead, human and supernatural, profane and sacred.

In MMOs, the body is also a common reference point, although it goes by different names depending on whether it embodies a mobile creature (“mob”), a non-player character (“NPC”), or a character played by a human gamer (“avatar”). The avatar is a liminal figure that video game studies has interpreted in various ways. The term itself originates with Hindu philosophy and mythology, from the Sanskrit word “avatarati”, or descent. The avatar here is a physical incarnation (human or animal) of a divine being “coming down” to a lower, material plane. In this way, the divine avatar resembles the underworld souls who take on tangible bodies despite their inherently ethereal, spiritual nature. The avatar takes on mortal characteristics and “participates in human life yet remains distinct in both an evolutionary and an ontological sense... The avatar exemplifies how to live in this world in order to eventually transcend it.”²⁵ Through the video game avatar, then, players simultaneously participate in the game from an embodied position within its diegetic virtual world while maintaining their external perspective.

Interpretations of the video game avatar have focused on various aspects of its liminal position, including its relationships to player identity, social context, and

²⁵ Ann Weinstone. *Avatar Bodies: a Tantra for Posthumanism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.p. 118.

interaction. My discussion of video game bodies primarily deals with the avatar, specifically as an incarnation of the player in the game world and the mediator of the game experience. The avatar's embodied perspective situates the player in a subjective position, a part of and exposed to the game world in which it exists.²⁶ Its capacities and abilities affect the player's agency and frame how the player experiences the game in its world.

1.9 Thesis Scope and Structure

This thesis addresses a segment of a very large problem area. Rather than addressing every element of chthonic poetics in all underworlds and in all games, it focuses the discussion to one aspect of the poetics in one example underworld to demonstrate the validity of the approach. Here, I look at the role of embodiment as one aspect of chthonic poetics in the medieval European vision crystallized in Dante's *Commedia*. I then evaluate how this aspect of chthonic poetics manifests and impacts gameplay and player perception in the context of a specific game, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*.

Dante's *Commedia* portrays a syncretic construction of the underworld. He draws from ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Biblical descriptions, and popular medieval narratives of "otherworld travel." His work thus reflects long-standing

²⁶ Klevjer, 10

European communal beliefs as much as individual invention, and Eileen Gardiner sees it is the apotheosis of the underworld in medieval Europe.²⁷

“...the Divine Comedy was the culmination of the entire body of medieval imaginative literature on the subject of the otherworld. His systemization of the cosmology of the otherworld seems to have ended the speculation of the medieval mind on that topic.”²⁸

The *Commedia* forms a crucial boundary event in otherworld studies, but its unique status also acts as a bridge between periods outside the medieval. On the one hand, it includes the classical underworld of Hades, by including Greek and Roman characters and geography. The *Commedia* had a profound influence on later art and culture, and through this influence it connects to later periods. Dante’s work was no longer relevant to nineteenth century religious cosmology, for instance, but the masterworks of Rodin and Doré demonstrate its power over the nineteenth century imagination.

My approach to the first part of the thesis begins with the translated text of Dante’s poem, supplemented by discursive cultural and media analysis of the rich and varied cultural sources he used for the *Commedia*. I pay particular attention to how deeply Dante roots his narrative of spiritual journey in physical

²⁷ Gardiner 1989, xi-xii.

²⁸ Gardiner 1989, xi-xii.

experiences, and how his geography reflects that understanding of the body as the core of experience and mortality.

While the focus of my study is *not* a historical review of either underworld or Dante imagery, I do consider the representation of embodiment in the *Commedia*'s world by other art, such as the illustrations by Botticelli and Doré, and the role of the body in derivative narratives the world has inspired, particularly in games. Formulating a poetics necessarily involves aesthetics, but like Gaston Bachelard I am interested in the phenomenological as well as the representational aspects of my subject. In other words: what is the body's experience, and how is it represented? Merleau-Ponty sees the body's experience in and of the world as the indivisible frame for perception (and thus conscious being) because "the body is our general medium for having a world."²⁹ This perspective is crucial when considering the avatar's body in interactive space. Since it transmits no tangible sensations to the player, what gives it power and believability, or "realness," is not just its appearance and form but also its capabilities and its reactions to events and conditions in the game world. The responsiveness of the avatar provokes an empathic emotional – and even physical – response from the interactor as a living, embodied creature. Taylor Carmen's observation that in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, perception "is structured by your body and by what it senses that it can and cannot do" readily

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and C. Smith (translator). *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962 p. 146.

applies to virtual worlds.³⁰ Accordingly, I also look at the internal rules that control the world (such as how time functions) and how they affect bodies existing in that world.

The second part focuses on in-game ethnographic observation and analysis. The research consists of long-term, in-depth play in one game, from the initiate stage through significant progress through the world's geography as well as player experience. I chose to focus on Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* for several reasons, including its immense popularity, environmental complexity, and prominence in scholarly discourse about virtual worlds and MMOGs.³¹ I also find it attractive because underworld influences appear at three levels in the game, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter four: the superficial or spectacular; the autochthonous or diegetic; and the metastructural. Furthermore, the player relationship is fundamentally different in the structure of an MMOG. Single-player games, for instance, can be instantiated and terminated by the decision of one person; MMOGs, on the other hand, are persistent, social worlds where time functions independently of player actions. Players cannot undo a decision just by going back to a convenient save point, nor does the game stop just because the player decides it is time to go bed. The stakes are higher. This irrevocability of action and dynamism gives MMOGs like *World of Warcraft* an independent

³⁰ Taylor Carmen, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophical Topics*: vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 1999. p. 219.

³¹ "WoW has become the canon. It will define this era of gaming. MMORPG literacy is going to require that you know WoW." Edward Castronova, comment on Terra Nova. (http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2006/04/endgame_bandwid.html#c16671635)

existence that more closely resembles the relationship of mythic underworlds to their traditional communities.

What metaphors are employed, and to what ends? There is no material necessity for food or drink in *World of Warcraft*, for instance, yet they have a conspicuous - even ritual- presence in the game mechanics, game world, and diagetic culture. Disability, on the other hand, is conspicuous by its absence. The primary activity in the game is fighting, either with other players in PvP (player-versus-player) combat or with mobile creatures (“mobs”) and NPCs. One would reasonably expect to see casualties of this action. But in the *World of Warcraft*, everyone is miraculously able-bodied.

What are the rules that govern how bodies appear and function in the game?

How does embodiment change during the course of gameplay? Do the relationships of the body to the environment, gameplay, and goals evolve?

Characters at lower levels, for example, are more vulnerable to bodily harm from multiple sources. Their “physical” vulnerability also provides the game with a means of controlling player behavior and circumscribing their movement through space. Powerful weapons, armor, skills, mounts, and stats protect “endgame” characters who have hit the highest achievable level, and they experience the game world in a very different way. I also consider phenomena like avatar

creation, the relation of bodies to the environment, and the use of bodies as the currency of advancement.

The fifth chapter proposes a framework for comparing chthonic elements between traditional underworlds and video games. I abstract unique aesthetic and functional rules and characteristics from the body conventions and characteristics that emerged from the discussions in parts two and three. These extrapolations form a chthonic poetics of embodiment that can be used as a comparative tool to understand how underworld aspects operate in video games. I look at ways we can utilize chthonic poetics as heuristic and hermeneutical tools for the study of video games, virtual worlds and player experience. I employ the poetics of chthonic embodiment as a tool to expand our understanding of player experience in the game, identity, transformation, and the formal affordances of game worlds as mythic sites for constructing meaning. I also offer additional sites of inquiry that might be productive avenues in which to continue research in the relationship among virtual worlds, digital media, and underworlds.

The model can be applied to other examples of underworld like Diyu (the Chinese underworld incorporating Taoist and Buddhist beliefs), Duat (the ancient Egyptian underworld), or Xibalba (the classical Mayan underworld). There are other aspects of chthonic poetics, in addition to embodiment, that we might

discern from looking at underworlds. I suggest spatiality and journey narratives as two areas inviting further investigation.

CHAPTER 2

EMBODIMENT IN DIGITAL AND SPIRITUAL SPACE

2.1 Connections Between Digital and Spiritual Space

Digital space shares the immaterial nature of spiritual space. The plasticity of representation and programmable modes of being that digital space affords has suggested parallels to, and sympathies with, the idealized places where souls go after death. This idea of disembodied embodiment requires a dualist model where mind and body can exist separately, even if in that separation they take on each other's characteristics. This liminality of being is reflected in conceptual models of space with semi-permeable boundaries. In cultures that imagine worlds of the living and worlds of the dead, there is often a rich mythological tradition of traffic between them.³²

The metaphysical nature of digital space has attracted a variety of critical evaluations. Michael Heim has looked at the long history of virtual models of space, placing "cyberspace" in the context of Platonic and Leibnizian

³² Wertheim 66

metaphysics. He describes cyberspace as a neo-Platonic space that supports the “ideal content of cognition with empirical specifics.”³³ Digital space for Heim is ultimately information space that “supplants physical space.”³⁴ While he acknowledges that the “secondary or stand-in bodies” that we can create in digital space may be liberating at first, the spectre of the machine haunts this brave new world. He cautions against the danger of equating these “cyberbodies,” through which we project ourselves into virtual space, with the essence of who we are, because in doing so we cease to be organic creatures and therefore cease to be.

“Can we ever be fully present when we live through a surrogate body standing in for us? The stand-in self lacks the vulnerability and fragility of our primary identity. The stand-in self can never fully represent us.”³⁵

While it is true that our virtual selves can never “fully represent us,” one could argue that our in-person, primary identities are similarly incapable of representing (or re-presenting) our primary identities in all their inconstant, contingent complexity. Nonetheless, what essentially concerns Heim is the emotional and ethical disconnect that he sees as inevitable when personal discourse is mediated by technological surrogates. His concern is familiar, but it does not acknowledge the broader implications of these “surrogate bodies” in virtual worlds as

³³ Heim (1993) 88-89

³⁴ Heim (1993) 98-99

³⁵ Heim (1993) 101

embodied media. The personae that people assume within virtual worlds have a greater immediacy and intimacy with their “primary identities” than Heim’s surrogate assumes. Ethnological studies of virtual communities have chronicled the intense emotional engagement that their participants have, even when considering only their in-world relationships.³⁶ An avatar or “cyberbody” enables an embodied perspective in its virtual world for the organic, living person who ultimately controls and identifies with it, and is shaped by it.

Michael Benedikt views cyberspace with a distinctly visionary eye. He notes that ancient mythology has an active presence in technological culture, and it informs how “we understand each other, test ourselves, and shape our lives.”³⁷

Cyberspace’s inherent plasticity provides the ideal platform for “the acting out of mythic realities” that were confined in pre-digital cultures to shamanistic rites, pharmacological substances and art.³⁸ He draws explicit connections between otherworlds and mythic planes in pre-digital societies and virtual worlds in digital space, and feels that because of the magical aspects of procedurality and programmable manipulation, cyberspace will continue to express “a good measure of mytho-logic.”³⁹

³⁶ T.L.Taylor (2006), Julian Dibbel (1998), Celia Pearce (2006)

³⁷ Benedikt 32

³⁸ Benedikt 32

³⁹ Benedikt 32

Benedikt's perception describes MMOs particularly well. They are an extension of mythic space in their content, which is typically epic in nature and often rooted in the mythology or history of one or more historical cultures. The scope and detail of the mythos in *WoW* (and the previous installments of the *Warcraft* series) covers several thousand years of diegetic history, struggles and intrigues by multiple races on multiple planes of existence – a truly super-human scale. The spectacular, social space created within MMOs creates an additional site for “mythic realities” to develop, and a player-created mythos has developed through chat and role-playing in-game, as well as externally through machinima, game videos, fan art, forums and community websites. *Warcraftmovies.com* is just one example that hosts hundreds of machinima created by players in *WoW*.⁴⁰

2.2 Soul as Spirit Body

Margaret Wertheim has done significant work in looking at cyberspace as a frontier of spiritual space. She identifies the utopian promises of perfected body, social equality and angelic existence within the modes of communication as well as the medium itself, where we become “beings of light” through the photons traveling over fiber optic cables and emanating from glowing screens. She also historicizes these impulses within a larger context of human spirituality.

⁴⁰ The “Recommendations” page lists over 600 films. (<http://www.warcraftmovies.com/rec.php>)

She focuses too narrowly, however, when she bases her argument on the Western, Christian tradition that grew from the early middle ages. This actually works against some of her arguments, as this tradition has had an implicit exclusivity that unnecessarily undermines her argument. The qualifications for which souls go where after death have varied over the centuries, but Heaven is exclusionary even in its broadest, most inclusive description. It excludes the wicked, unrepentant and unrighteous by definition, and while this may be morally defensible, it cannot be the standard from which “inclusive” is determined.

A broader view is also supported by the many elements she has identified with the New Jerusalem and the Heavenly City that appear in other cultures’ spiritual constructions. Wertheim is on the right track in seeing spiritual space in the online world, and the expansion of digital spiritual space has appeared in such work as Brenda Laurel and Rachel Strickland’s *Placeholder*.⁴¹ The spiritual aptitude of digital space is more evident when we pull back and consider spiritual spaces from non-Western, non-Christian cultures. Traditional underworlds are usually inclusive, in that all souls pass through them regardless of destination. Anubis weighs the souls of the good as well as the wicked, and everyone gets to take a boat ride with Charon, although not all voyages end up in the Elysian Fields.

⁴¹ Brenda Laurel, Rachel Strickland, Rob Tow. “Placeholder: Landscape and Narrative In Virtual Environments,” ACM Computer Graphics Quarterly Volume 28 Number 2 May 1994.

Michael Benedikt takes up this more inclusive, universal character of the New Jerusalem that emerges in digital space. “From Hollywood Hills to Tibet,” images of the Heavenly City share common features of weightlessness, radiance, impeccable cleanliness, “palaces upon palaces”, and “peace and harmony through the rule of the good and wise.”⁴² This hopeful construct that appears in eastern and western cultures flows from our attempts to create earthly Edens in order to repudiate our mortality and fall from grace. Creating transcendent spaces is a response to “the resentment we feel for our own bodies’ cloddishness, limitations and final treachery: their mortality.”⁴³

These transcendent spaces require equally transcendent bodies in order to fulfill the promise that Benedikt sees in them. A space is only a planar perspective if we cannot travel through it and experience it subjectively. Game avatars provide this spatial access to the transcendent.

2.3 Game Avatar as Spirit Body

Players are conventionally represented in MMOGs as game avatars. They engage the game world through the experience of their personalized character, and avatars frame players’ interactions with each other. In virtual digital worlds, the avatar also takes on the role of the soul’s “spirit body” that appears in

⁴² Benedikt 38

⁴³ Benedikt 37-38

mythological underworld narratives, shaman journeys, religious visionary literature, and the *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri. The game avatar is a liminal creature, and this poses challenges in how we should evaluate it in the context of game worlds.

Katherine Verdery uses the unique material and symbolic qualities dead bodies possess as a way of understanding political and cultural transformation in societies. Their symbolic power flows in part from being a personal, material artifact that can be displayed and localized.⁴⁴ Statues share this quality as “dead people cast in bronze or carved in stone.”⁴⁵ They have an added power, however; they are monumental representations that transmute the profane (such as a party leader) into the sacred (such as a martyr). “By arresting the process of that person’s bodily decay, a statue alters the temporality associated with that person, bringing him into the realm of the timeless or the sacred, like an icon.”⁴⁶ Thus Verdery includes statues in the same culturally and politically functional category as dead (organic) bodies.

Game avatars share some of the symbolic characteristics Verdery establishes for statues and other dead bodies. They are personal, having been chosen and customized by the player. They are material, being an integrated element in the game world’s environment. They are spectacular; that is, they are made to be

⁴⁴ Verdery 27

⁴⁵ Verdery 5

⁴⁶ Verdery 5

displayed and viewed by the player and by others in the social game space.

Avatars are inherently localized due to their being uniquely instantiated. Most importantly, avatars are iconic and idealized forms, and they often possess heroic strength or abilities outside the grasp of the average person. In this regard they too cross over from the profane into the sacred, as do icons and Verdery's monumental dead.

Avatars ultimately have more in common with live bodies than with dead ones, however, despite their being the products of code and, ultimately, just inanimate assemblages of binary data. They utilize many of the same conventions and taboos associated with living bodies. They inhabit the virtual worlds in which they appear, and their "life" connects the player with the space in a personal way.⁴⁷

The symbolic scale at the player level is intimate rather than epic, although the diegetic narrative of the game may describe a character's role or performance in epic terms. Any individual avatar generally has no more influence on a player than any other. If they were statues, they would be sculptures of the crowd.

Thus the game avatar possesses an ambiguous nature. It is monumental, yet personal. It is individual, yet iconic. In this liminality, game avatars echo the heroes and characters from underworld myths – not necessarily divine, but

⁴⁷ Nasser Nassiri, Norman Powell, David Moore. "Avatar gender and personal space invasion anxiety level in desktop collaborative virtual environments," *Virtual Reality*, Volume 8 , Issue 2 (September 2004) Pages: 107 – 117.

undertaking dangerous journeys and dealing with gods, monsters or spirits on other realms of existence.

2.4 Poetics Through Diverse Approaches

There are many different approaches to the idea of poetics, and the term refers to different things depending on where and by whom it is being used. I look at poetics as the essential characteristics of a phenomenon.

Angela Ndalianis chose “aesthetics” instead of poetics to describe her writings on the neo-baroque and contemporary entertainment, although previous work on the neo-baroque by Bornhofen has explicitly used poetics in analyzing the field. The difference lies in the nature of the media the authors consider. Bornhofen examines the neo-baroque as an influence on Latin American literature, and the result is relatively traditional literary criticism. Ndalianis, on the other hand, takes on a more spectacular and dynamic subject area that ranges from video games and to film to theme park attractions. Her subject is a largely visual aspect of modern leisure culture created to entertain and inspire wonder. As such, her choice of “aesthetics” rather than “poetics” emphasizes the importance of pleasure and taste to her subject.

This is not an inviolate rule, however. Turnbull could easily have called his *Poetics of Gardens* “Aesthetics of Gardens,” as the topic is rooted in sensory

appreciation. Likewise, Bachelard could have published the “Aesthetics of Space,” on account of his subjective and sensual approach to domestic architecture, instead of the *Poetics of Space*. But his choice is telling, as his work is decidedly poetic in tone.

2.5 Summary

The avatar is an inherently liminal figure, from its mythological origins to how players relate to it in the game world, which itself carries strong spiritual and profane meaning for players. This ambiguity is further compounded by the avatar’s being both the objective tool through which the player navigates the game as well as the subjective perspective of the player in the game world. This complexity should not confuse how we understand embodiment in MMOs, as our physical bodies also present a similar dilemma of object and subject. As Carmen explains, “for Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely the phenomenological dovetailing of our bodily movements with our visual orientation that constitutes our positive sense of being embodied perceptual selves.”⁴⁸ We might revise Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment for digital space to say that, in an MMO, the avatar is the general medium for having a game world.

A particularly constructive definition of poetics for the purpose of this study is “descriptions that work with some consistency and which allow us to make

⁴⁸ Carmen, 221.

interesting discoveries.”⁴⁹ A poetics of a thing includes its bones (such as Turnbull’s “rhetorical landscapes” of materials, shapes, relationships and ideas) and its soul (which Bachelard pursued in his exploration of houses and their parts). Ndalianis’ work with spectacle integrates with this approach, despite her preference of nomenclature. The role of pleasure and shared wonder in the spectacle reflects the soul of the neo-Baroque phenomena she examines, while the bones lie in the virtuosity and technical structure required to create and present them. What might a chthonic poetics involve, using this model? The bones, or structural component, include the spatial organization as well as the functional rules or standards. The soul, or expressive component, comes from the metaphor and visual representation that manifests within those structural guides.

⁴⁹ Tim Bulkeley, in his notes on literary analyses of Hebrew narrative and biblical texts. (<http://bible.gen.nz/0/poetics.htm>)

CHAPTER 3

INFERNO E PURGATORIO: CHTHONIC EMBODIMENT

IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

3.1 Introduction to the *Commedia*

Dante Alighieri wrote the *Commedia* in his later years, during his exile from Florence. He had been active in Florentine politics and public life, and was one of the city's leading officials in 1300. The combustion of political intrigue involving the theocratic papacy of Boniface VIII, the Italian intervention by Charles of Valois, and warring Florentine Guelf factions resulted in Dante's going into exile in 1302, under threat of death.⁵⁰ He moved often among cities while conspiring with other exiles in hope of a return to Florence. He had already started on the first sections of the *Commedia* by the time he moved to Ghibelline-friendly Verona (1312), and he completed the work after settling permanently in Ravenna with his family (1319).⁵¹ The civil wars that wracked Florence and Tuscany left their imprint on the work, as well as the poet's life. Prominent figures from the conflicts populate the poem's lands of the dead, particularly the circles of the Inferno.

⁵⁰ Mazzotta, pp 7-8.

⁵¹ Mazzotta, 8-10.

The organization of the *Commedia* is regular and symbolic. Each of the three *cantiches* (canticles, or poetic sections) describes a particular spiritual territory, and each *canticha* breaks down into *cantos* (or verses), thirty-four for the *Inferno* and thirty-three for the *Purgatorio*, and thirty-two for the *Paradiso*. The number three re-appears through the poem in different guises.⁵² The reference to the Christian Trinity is implicit; in addition to there being three distinct territories, the nine internal subdivisions of the *Inferno* and *Paradise* are multiples of three. Bright spirits sing heavenly praises three times in the latter, and Satan has a tripartite body in the core of the former. The Trinitarian influence – written into the environment and creatures even in the bowels of Hell - reflects the ubiquity of God's presence in Creation ("His glory, by whose might all things are mov'd, pierces the universe, and in one part sheds more resplendence, elsewhere less").⁵³

The sources the *Commedia* draws on reflect the complex context in which Dante was writing. The poem contains Christian and pagan elements, but it is as much a political work as it is a protestation of faith. The incongruities these factors pose contribute to its vitality rather than detract from it. Indeed, they support its power and continued relevance for later readers.

⁵² Musa, pp. ix- xvi.

⁵³ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I

3.2 Dante's Interpretation of the Body

It bears pointing out that Dante was not a medieval ascetic, nor did he abhor the body. The poet actively participated in secular politics and lived a cosmopolitan life.⁵⁴ The *Commedia* is an inherently sensuous work that celebrates beauty and love while lamenting the treachery of sin. Abrams goes so far as to call the poet "a cognoscenti of sensual delight" and the *Commedia* his "valediction to the flesh."⁵⁵ Dante, like Augustine, locates the soul rather than the body as the cause of sin. Furthermore, the body and soul have an "indelible" connection in Dante's mind, so that "it is reproduced temporarily after death."⁵⁶ Entering Paradise does not sunder that link. It merely defers the eventual "permanent transformation when soul is joined with glorified body" that is "not discarded but is redeemed by being totally expressive of its purified soul."⁵⁷ Thus the body has a privileged position in the poem's worldview. The souls in the *Commedia* are organized spatially as bodies, and the control mechanisms that organize them are directed at the spirit bodies' capacities to feel and respond to sensual stimuli and conditions.

⁵⁴ Jacoff, 3-10

⁵⁵ Abrams 3

⁵⁶ Lindheim 24

⁵⁷ Lindheim 28, 16

3.3 *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in Relation to *Paradiso*

My study touches only briefly on Paradise, the territory covered by the third and last *cantiche* of the *Commedia*. It is an equal part of the poem, and comparing it to the *cantiches* preceding it can help illuminate many of the motifs, themes and conventions that Dante uses throughout the *Commedia*. *Paradiso* otherwise lies outside this discussion for several reasons. It is geographically separate. Hell and Purgatory symbolically and physically connect to each other and to the material world of the living. Paradise, on the other hand, lies in the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic celestial space outside the Earth to which Hell and Purgatory are joined.⁵⁸

Hell and Purgatory connect through their topographic symbolism, as well. The pit of Hell and the mountain of Purgatory invert each other's moral and spatial orientation along the vertical axis. Paradise's orientation and topographic reflect a different model. The heavenly territory consists of nine concentric material spheres radiating out above the Earth, with the Empyrean (the purely immaterial region in which God dwells) stretching out beyond without limit. The orientation in this model looks outward and is diffuse. When one travels through concentric spheres, the vertical axis is irrelevant; the next sphere is as much "up" as it is "down." True, Dante continues to use upward motion in the *Paradiso* as a metaphor to emphasize the course of the soul's journey going *towards* God (and

⁵⁸ Jacoff 107.

away from sin), but from a geometric perspective (and theological, as the Empyrean wraps around all spheres of Creation) such a distinction is moot. This contrasts with the *Inferno* and Purgatory, where the vertical axis bears crucial importance as a topographic and spiritual orientation (figures 24, 30-31). The spatial orientations of the *Inferno* and Purgatory distill their symbolic cores through increasingly narrower subdivisions. The vertical axis points downward in the *Inferno*, the spiritual and geographic pole being Lucifer at the center of the lowest level. Purgatory inverts this orientation of the vertical axis, as the focus there looks upward, toward the terrestrial paradise on the top of the mountain and the celestial spheres (and God) beyond.

Furthermore, bodies have a close relationship with their environments in Purgatory and Hell, and bodies operate in similar ways in these places. Bodies do not have this relevance in the landscape of the *Paradiso*; indeed, bodies are conspicuous in Paradise by their absence. In contrast, the body is the focus in the *Inferno* and Purgatorio *cantiches*. It is the means through which ritual is enacted, and the site on which sin is recorded and memorialized. The “spirit bodies” Dante encounters in Purgatory and the *Inferno* are manifestations of the soul (reminiscent of the divine avatar of Hindu tradition, but in a spiritual form for mortals) and, to a degree, sin. Embodiment is much weaker in Paradise, however, where sin does not exist. Most of the souls Dante the Pilgrim meets there are characterized by light, not form or substance

"Sudden, as I perceiv'd them, deeming these
Reflected semblances to see of whom
They were, I turn'd mine eyes, and nothing saw,"⁵⁹

"This substance, upon which a double light
Doubles itself, was seen by me to sing,
And to their dance this and the others moved,
And in the manner of swift-hurrying sparks
Veiled themselves from me with a sudden distance."⁶⁰

Of the three realms, Paradise offers the least in the way of sensory stimulation, and Dante relies on the "imageless vision" that scholars have connected with Augustine's highest form of vision.⁶¹ To borrow from Gertrude Stein, "there is no *there* there." The concentric nesting of the celestial spheres creates a relative spatiality in heaven, but souls experience it as an intellectual space rather than as a sensuous landscape such as the two previous *cantiche*s describe.

The relationship and connections between Purgatory and Hell argue for a model of chthonic embodiment that recognizes those similarities. These landscapes are intelligible only through the "lived" experience of the body. The qualitative

⁵⁹ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III

⁶⁰ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto VII

⁶¹ Freccero 770; see also Chiarenza 1972 and Newman 1967

affinities in the rule sets and orientation between these places sets them apart from Paradise in fundamental ways that ultimately limit the usefulness of *Paradiso*, particularly in discussing embodiment.

3.4 Purgatory and Inferno as Connected Geography

The geography of the poem binds Hell and Purgatory together in an ecology of sin, and the rivers that flow through these places of suffering bypass heaven.⁶²

The rivers all run into Cocytus eventually, delivering the sum of mankind's sin and suffering into the lake of ice that imprisons Lucifer. Dante emphasizes the connection between these two regions through his explanation of their physical formation, with the earth moved by Lucifer's fall forming Purgatory's mountain.⁶³

The two regions mirror each other, and Purgatory inverts many of the characteristics and conventions of Hell.

The topography of the Inferno consists of nine concentric circles, rather than spheres – thus it is conceptually “flat,” where each circle exists as a discrete plane, each at a different vertical coordinate in the pit. The depth of the pit is largely irrelevant to the damned; what impacts their experience is their immediate environment, the one circle in which they spend eternity. They cannot move

⁶² Donno, 138. This fascinating essay examines the hydrography of the *Commedia* and constructs a coherent topographic picture of the land Dante describes.

⁶³ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 34. The fall creates the pit not only by the displacement of earth caused by Satan's plummeting, but also by the earth recoiling from his form in abhorrence.

between circles. The vertical axis has immense importance in the Inferno and Purgatory, and the boundaries drawn by the circles highlight the importance of controlling the bodies. These spatial structures not only ring the embodiment of ultimate evil - Lucifer at the bottom of the pit - but they also circumscribe the “spirit bodies” of the damned and bind their souls to their respective levels.

To reach Purgatory Dante and Virgil must pass through all circles of Hell and climb down along Lucifer's body.

“He took fast hold upon the shaggy flanks
and then descended, down from tuft to tuft,
between the tangled hair and icy crusts.”⁶⁴

They begin facing up toward his heads and climb down his torso, but Virgil then reverses the orientation of their bodies partway down.

“When we had reached the point at which the thigh
revolves, just at the swelling of the hip,
my guide, with heavy strain and rugged work,

reversed his head to where his legs had been
and grappled on the hair, as one who climbs

⁶⁴ Dante, Inferno, Canto 34

I thought that we were going back to Hell.

Hold tight, my master said he panted like
a man exhausted it is by such stairs
that we must take our leave of so much evil”

...

“I raised my eyes, believing I should see
the half of Lucifer that I had left;
instead I saw him with his legs turned up”⁶⁵

In this way they effectively climb “up,” despite facing “down.” The symbolic importance of vertical orientation appears throughout the poem, whereby movement up leads toward God, purity and light, while movement down leads away from these, toward Satan, sin and darkness. The severity of the sins punished in the *Inferno* increases with the depth of the circles. The “spirit bodies” belonging to the souls of the dead reflect this spiritual orientation, in turn, as the capacity for movement and physical freedom roughly decreases with depth. The tree form taken by the suicides in the seventh circle literally roots them in place (“Men once we were, and now are changed to trees”), and the damned souls in the lowest *bolgia* of *Cocytus* are completely immobilized in ice (“And now with

⁶⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 34

fear I set it down in meter I was where all the shades were fully covered but visible as wisps of straw in glass.”)⁶⁶

The spatial model of Purgatory, a mountain, inverts the conical void of the *Inferno* (Figure 31). Terraces of light and hope replace the circles of darkness and woe, and the path leads upward towards the terrestrial paradise and the first celestial sphere of Paradise.

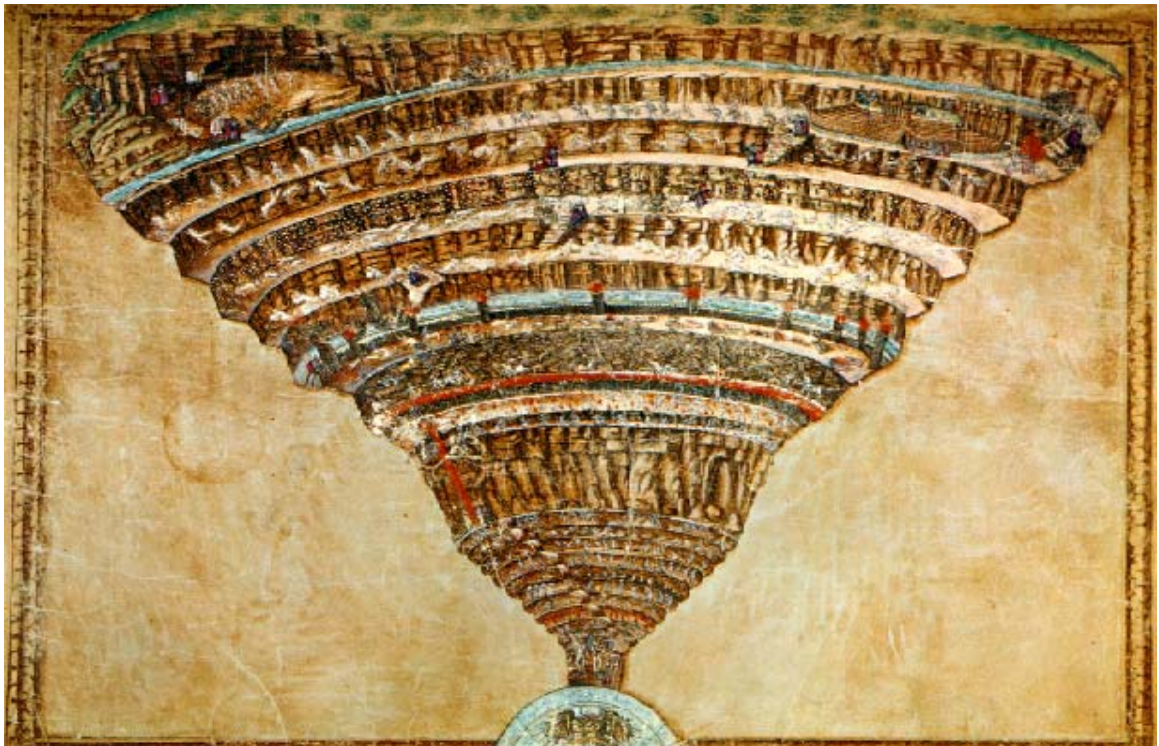


Figure 24. Botticelli's schematic of the *Inferno*.

⁶⁶ Dante, *Inferno*, Cantos 13, 34



Figure 25. Botticelli's drawing of Lucifer, explaining how Virgil and Dante pass through Hell and into Purgatory by means of changing their orientation to his body.

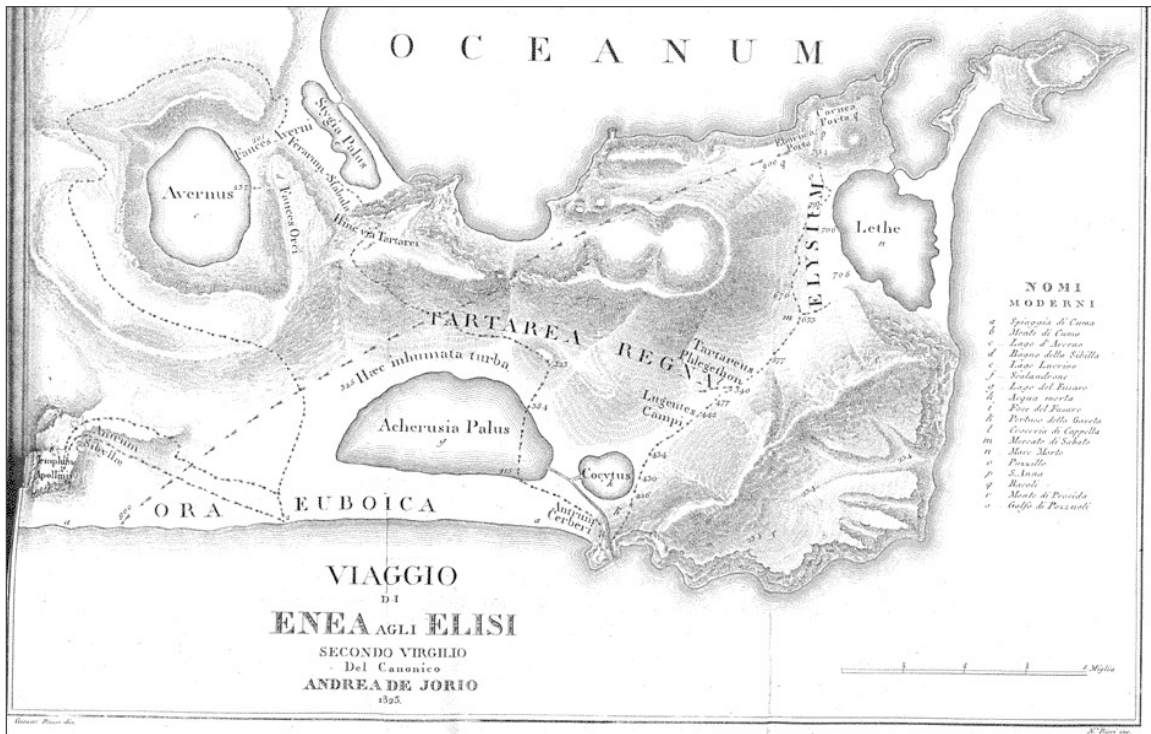


Figure 26. Andrea de Jorio's *Viaggio di Enea all' inferno ed agli elisii secondo Virgilio* depicts features in Virgil's underworld in terms of the actual geographical features of the Cumae region.

3.5 Narrative Progression through Love, Space and Bodies

In the first two *cantiches* of the *Commedia*, Dante the Pilgrim travels from a forest down into Hell and up through Purgatory under the protection and guidance of the Roman poet Virgil, whose *Aeneid* described a descent to the underworld (figure 26) that influenced Dante's imaginative geography of the Inferno (and, to

a lesser extent, Purgatory).⁶⁷ Lindheim observes that the poem “defines all motives, good and evil, as forms of love,” and the poem organizes these forms of love spatially in ways that the souls experience in their embodiment.⁶⁸ Dante’s journey down through the *Inferno* and up to the top of Mount Purgatory (and eventually to Paradise) reflects the progression “from sea to shore to garden, from perverse love” to mis-ordered love to perfect love.⁶⁹

“When we had crossed the threshold of the door
Which the perverted love of souls disuses,
Because it makes the crooked way seem straight,”⁷⁰

“And he to me: Because thou fixest still
Thy mind entirely upon earthly things,
Thou pluckest darkness from the very light.

That goodness infinite and ineffable
Which is above there, runneth unto love,
As to a lucid body comes the sunbeam.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ John Freccaro’s Introduction to the Pinsky translation of *Inferno*, xvi.

⁶⁸ Lindheim 31

⁶⁹ Lindheim 29

⁷⁰ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto X

⁷¹ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XV

This spatial narrative appears in the range of corporeality the souls' bodies demonstrate and, consequently, the degree of external control and discipline imposed upon them. The profoundly carnal bodies of the damned are disciplined by explicit physical torments inflicted by supernatural wardens. The salvageable sinners in Purgatory, met by Dante at a further point in the narrative and in the geography, are willing participants in their sufferings, which gradually unmake the souls' "spirit bodies" as they purge their sins.

"Nor once alone encompassing our route
We come to add fresh fuel to the pain:
Pain, said I, solace rather: for that will
To the tree leads us, by which Christ was led"⁷²

"Indeed we should help them to wash away
the stains they carried from this world, so that,
made pure and light, they reach the starry wheels."

...

"for he who comes with me, because he wears
the weight of Adam's flesh as dress, despite
his ready will, is slow in his ascent."⁷³

⁷² Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XIII

⁷³ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XI

Dante's narrative progression concatenates the possible ways of spiritual being available to souls after death through the landscapes that bind their spiritual bodies. Dante's relative freedom, granted by the will of heaven, in traveling through these territories also highlights the spatial controls that act upon those souls. The Pilgrim's experiences, particularly his very physical responses to the sights he encounters, in each of the landscapes contrasts with the different ways of being manifested by the souls inhabiting them. This contrast is effective because *all* are embodied souls; although the Pilgrim experiences the landscapes as a living man and they as dead souls, they know those landscapes through the capacity of their bodies.

3.6 The Body in the *Commedia*

Several lines of examination, with associated conventions and rules, present themselves in an examination of embodiment in Dante's chthonic world. The body is a starting point, but what is significant is how the body experiences the world in which it is situated. Dourish summarizes this phenomenological interpretation of embodiment as "a participative status, a way of being, rather than a physical property."⁷⁴

The first step in this examination of the ways of chthonic embodiment in the *Commedia* looks at the different aspects of "body" the poem expresses. The

⁷⁴ Dourish 125.

hosts of beings in the *Commedia* have different ontological states, and this distinction creates different ways of being for them. Within these ways of being, we can then consider their capabilities, or the agency and means possessed by these beings to act within their environments. The corollary to this embodied capability is capacity, or the manner and degree to which the beings are affected and controlled by their environments.

3.6.1 Categories of Being I: Living Mortals

Bodies fall into three basic categories in the *Commedia*. The first is bodies belonging to living, mortal beings. Dante is the sole example in the poem. He passes through the chthonic landscape as a man, who grows weary with fatigue, who trembles at the face of terror and exults in the presence of the sublime. His materiality shocks many of the souls he encounters.

“I HAD already from those shades departed,
And followed in the footsteps of my Guide,
When from behind, pointing his finger at me,

One shouted: See, it seems as if shone not
The sunshine on the left of him below,

And like one living seems he to conduct him"⁷⁵

"When they became aware I gave no place
For passage of the sunshine through my body
They changed their song into a long, hoarse Oh!

And two of them, in form of messengers,
Ran forth to meet us, and demanded of us,
Of your condition make us cognizant.

And said my Master: Ye can go your way
And carry back again to those who sent you,
That this one's body is of very flesh."⁷⁶

The demonic and supernatural beings in the *Inferno* react with surprise, but also with rage and indignation at the transgression they see at a mortal walking freely among them.

"Close did I press myself with all my person
Beside my Leader, and turned not mine eyes
From off their countenance, which was not good.

⁷⁵ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto V

⁷⁶ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto V

They lowered their rakes, and Wilt thou have me hit him,

They said to one another, on the rump?

And answered: Yes; see that thou nick him with it."⁷⁷

Dante's body leaves traces on the environment as he moves through the chthonic landscape.

"When he'd uncovered his enormous mouth,

he said to his companions: Have you noticed

how he who walks behind moves what he touches?

Dead soles are not accustomed to do that."⁷⁸

"And so we made our way across that heap

of stones, which often moved beneath my feet

because my weight was somewhat strange for them."⁷⁹

Dante's mortal body and its capabilities awes and inspires as well as shocks. It carries a disruptive force, as he walks among them without the restraints that structure their eternal rituals of punishment. His living presence reminds the

⁷⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXI

⁷⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII

⁷⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII

damned, trapped in their memorialization of sin, of the mortal life they neglected as well as the glorified life they cannot have. Virgil uses this mortal power to entice the titan Antaeus to carry them down to the floor of Cocytus.

“Don't send us on to Tityus or Typhon;
this man can give you what is longed for here;
therefore bend down and do not curl your lip.

He still can bring you fame within the world,
for he's alive and still expects long life,
unless grace summon him before his time.”⁸⁰

The mortal pilgrim feels fear and the physical sensations of Hell and Purgatory acutely. His terror drives him to cling to his guide and clutch Virgil bodily for support and reassurance. The power of Dante's living body, and the sacred duty it confers to its escort, affects how Virgil can act during their journey; it lends mass, strength and solidity to his shade.

“The while below there fixedly I gazed,
My Leader, crying out: Beware, beware!
Drew me unto himself from where I stood.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXI

⁸¹ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXI

The protection given from heaven limits his physical capacity, in that emotions and physical sensations frame his experience, but his body cannot be harmed or altered without divine consent. Dante experiences the wall of fire in Purgatory as painful physical sensation, but the flames do not burn his body or char his clothes.

“Of this be sure: though in its womb that flame
A thousand years contain'd thee, from thy head

No hair should perish.”⁸²

...

“I would have cast me into molten glass
To cool me, when I enter'd; so intense
Rag'd the conflagrant mass.”⁸³

His physical senses magnify the sensual horrors of Hell, but the suffering he observes in Purgatory provokes imaginative and visionary responses.

“And even as this image burst asunder
Of its own self, in fashion of a bubble

⁸² Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII

⁸³ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII

In which the water it was made of fails,

There rose up in my vision a young maiden

Bitterly weeping, and she said: O queen,

Why hast thou wished in anger to be naught?"

...

"As sleep is broken, when upon a sudden

New light strikes in upon the eyelids closed,

And broken quivers ere it dieth wholly,

So this imagining of mine fell down

As soon as the effulgence smote my face,

Greater by far than what is in our wont."⁸⁴

Dante the pilgrim embodies the reader's subjective position. His capability to move through space and his capacity to feel the suffering and the sublime that he encounters frame our experience of the poem. But his embodied reactions also reflect how these environments affect and discipline the souls within them. The damned have their physical torment externally imposed on them against their volition, while the suffering experienced by the souls in Purgatory results from their participation in the trials endured by their spirit bodies. Dante moves through the landscape by means of Virgil's guidance and the divine protection

⁸⁴ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XVIII.

that shields them; in this regards he has more capability than those around him, dead and immortal, damned and purgatory. Yet he feels and reacts to the sensations and torments as acutely as the dead souls. His capacity for feeling and being influenced by his environment does not diminish as he journeys on, even as the burden of his sin lifts from him.

3.6.2 Categories of Being II: the Dead

The second category of bodies includes the “spirit bodies” manifested by the souls of the dead. Their ways of being depend on their particular sins and, by extension, location in the *Commedia*. The soul creates its spirit body soon after reaching the chthonic shore. Once the soul understands whether it is meant for Hell or Purgatory, it fashions its form, “a shape that is, potentially, real body,” out of the air that surrounds it.⁸⁵ The capabilities and capacities of that form depending on the classification of the soul and, consequently, the landscape that controls it.

3.6.2.1 The Damned

In some regions of the *Inferno*, the souls of the damned clearly manifest in corporal form and substance as well as with corporal senses and capacity, such as speech. In others they seem to lack substance or form yet still perceive their

⁸⁵ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXV

environment with “organic” senses rather than just spiritual consciousness. The Roman poet Statius, whom Dante meets in Purgatory, explains how immaterial souls achieve this apparent paradox:

“Since from that airy body it takes on
its semblance, that soul is called 'shade': that shape
forms organs for each sense, even for sight.
“This airy body lets us speak and laugh;
with it we form the tears and sigh the sighs
that you, perhaps, have heard around this mountain.

Just as we are held fast by longings and
by other sentiments, our shade takes form.”⁸⁶

The power of emotion and memory thus aids strength to the soul's embodiment, and the importance to the soul of recreating the expressivity of physical experience is evident. This is shown by the souls of the lustful whom Dante encounters in *Inferno* Canto V (figure 29). On the one hand, the people “by black air oppressed” who are “foundering in the wind's rough buffetings” are among the least material of the souls he meets.⁸⁷ The adulteress Francesca has form, but she has little substance or mass and like all the shades casts no

⁸⁶ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXV

⁸⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V.

shadow. Her wraithlike form does not diminish her capacity both to feel and to express emotions in a strongly embodied fashion.

This lightness of being inflicted upon the lustful souls does not indicate spiritual purity, as occurs among the souls of the blessed. It is, instead, a symbolic punishment that also curtails the soul's capabilities and agency in the underworld.

“The hellish hurricane, which never rests,
drives on the spirits with its violence
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.”

...

“now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them.
There is no hope that ever comforts them
no hope for rest and none for lesser pain.”⁸⁸

Their bodies were the sites of their sin in life, and their punishment strips them of the comfort and pleasure they found in that carnality. Francesca and her lover Paolo drift together in the maelstrom as shades with no hope of perfect, glorified bodies in the Resurrection. The lustful shades are unable to resist the tossing powerful winds for long, and thus the physical discipline of the wind provides a spatial way of controlling their souls. In this way the space of the underworld

⁸⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V.



Figure 27. Botticelli's illustration of the panders and seducers in the first bolgia of the eighth circle of the Inferno (canto XVIII).



Figure 28. Detail of figure 27. Note that Botticelli has placed Dante and Virgil at multiple points in the image, to communicate their passage through the space. While they experience time, the damned, who eternally repeat the same actions, in essence do not



Figure 29. Dore's illustration of Dante's interrogation of the damned lovers in *Inferno* Canto V.

3.6.2.2 The Penitents

Souls in Purgatory are also organized spatially, and the spirit body provides the medium for that control. There are fundamental differences, however, with the relationship of space and body souls in Purgatory in comparison to those in the Geographies of the Underworld: the Poetics of Chthonic Embodiment and Virtual Worlds

Inferno. The soul that successfully completes its spiritual cleansing in Purgatory can move up from the terrace to which it had been constrained, toward Heaven. They have the capability to move around, but the promise of absolution motivates them to stay in their proscribed terraces and complete their purgation first. By willingly enduring meaningful pain, a soul in Purgatory expiates its sin. This spiritual purgation changes the spirit body, making it lighter and more agile as the soul approaches perfection. The purgative process also triggers changes in state, as the soul that completes its allotted punishment can then pass through the threshold guarded by that terrace's angel. Their capacity to experience suffering enables them to expand their capability to move through the landscape and towards a perfected, transcendent state of being.

Dante the pilgrim experiences this personally as he moves through the terraces of Mount Purgatory. An angel marked his forehead with seven Ps, one for each terrace's associated sin, before he entered the first gate. Dante experiences a sympathetic purification as he moves through each terrace and witnesses the suffering endured by the souls there. This purgation-by-proxy causes the P representing that area's sin to disappear from the man's forehead. This re-writing of his body reflects the change to his soul that will allow him to pass the guardian at the threshold. His body is correspondingly lighter and he finds it increasingly easier to climb up the mountain.

“And while I climbed behind the two swift spirits,
not laboring at all, for I was lighter
than I had been along the other stairs”⁸⁹

His guide Virgil does not receive these boons; the state of his soul and the capabilities of his spirit body are static because he belongs to the infernal territory. Having been denied the capacity to be transformed by suffering, Virgil is unable to expand the capabilities of his spirit body for independent travel across the thresholds of the spiritual geography. He passes through the gates of Purgatory as a condition of his being a divinely-ordained psychopomp, rather than through the mechanism of purgation. The souls able to internalize the transformative suffering in Purgatory overcome the spatial control disciplined upon their bodies; Virgil the damned, however, remains controlled by the special order.

3.6.2.3 Categories of Being III: Living Immortals

The third category encompasses the bodies of the supernatural beings that dwell in the spiritual realms. The variety is greatest in the *Inferno*, which houses titans, centaurs, fallen angels and other mythological figures, but the angels guarding

⁸⁹ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXII

Purgatory also qualify. This group shares characteristics of the other two categories, in that they appear in bodies that seem to be alive but are not mortal. (There is no indication given in the text that these creatures have previously died and now exist as bodies created by their souls' memories, as the humans have.) These creatures have the capability to inflict pain and injury to the souls, but their role in the spiritual world largely circumscribes their capability to move in the landscape.

Purgatory incorporates its angels in the spatial control of the souls there, but they are not direct instruments of discipline. Unlike Chiron's centaur patrols in the seventh circle, the angels do not directly control or punish the souls within their partition.⁹⁰ Instead, the guardians in Purgatory define the geographic thresholds between spaces and control movement across boundaries. Because the poem's physical space reflects the spiritual condition of the souls in it, the angels also mark ritual thresholds between sin and grace, control and freedom.

3.7 Embodied Ritual

Ritual pervades the behavior of the souls and how they experience their punishments and trials. It defines the structure of those trials and their inherently repetitive nature and significance. Ritual also appears in the intercessionary

⁹⁰ Around the seventh circle, centaurs by the "many thousands wheel around the moat, their arrows aimed at any soul that thrusts above the blood more than its guilt allots." Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII.

interactions of the pilgrims with the demonic residents of the Inferno, as well as with their angelic counterparts who guard the terraces of Purgatory.

Hell and Purgatory share a similar spatial organization of souls according to specific sin that controls their bodies through ritualized punishment. Likewise, in both territories the punishment is a symbolic inversion of the behaviors and actions in life that prevented their entrance to Paradise. The ritual of punishment has different goals in the two realms, however, that manifests in the means of its execution.

3.7.1 Ritualized Punishment in the Inferno

In Hell the ritual of punishment acts as an anchor that holds the soul in place. This binds souls spiritually as well as spatially, for they cannot move beyond their prescribed circles, nor does their suffering improve the condition or future prospects of their souls. Indeed, the future reunification with their true bodies promises even greater suffering.

“At which I said: And after the great sentence
o master will these torments grow, or else
be less, or will they be just as intense?

And he to me: Remember now your science,
which says that when a thing has more perfection,
so much the greater is its pain or pleasure.

Though these accursed sinners never shall
attain the true perfection, yet they can
expect to be more perfect then than now.”⁹¹

Souls consigned to the Inferno repeat their punishments eternally without hope of transformation. The misers and spendthrifts in the fourth circle roll huge weights with their chests while railing against each other's failings. They do this not to gain mastery over their souls, bodies or the space in which they dwell. They are, instead, reenacting their guilt over and over again. The eternal repetition of their souls' corruption is, in effect, a monument to the sin that entombs their souls. The ritual punishment locks them in place spatially in the same way that unrepentant erring bars their souls from salvation and glorified perfection in Paradise.

3.7.2 Ritual in Purgatory: Physical Trial and Spiritual Progression

The physical trial mechanic works differently in Purgatory, where the intent of the ritual suffering is to excise the sin from the soul, not enshrine it. Ritual suffering

⁹¹ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VI

also frees the soul in a more literal way, as it provides the means of moving through the landscape and across geographic as well as spiritual thresholds.

The seven terraces of Mount Purgatory divide souls semantically and vertically based on the sins they committed in life, much as the nine circles organize the souls of the damned in the Inferno. Souls can only progress through the landscape during the day, in recognition of the animating and omnipotent light of God towards which they move. The orientation of progression is vertical and unidirectional; to move backwards or down would be unnatural and untenable. Purgatory is a ritual landscape for the spiritual cleansing of souls and its focus and function looks up to Paradise. Backtracking would be a literal and metaphoric return to sin. That sin, however, has been expiated and purged and thus no longer exists, and the soul cannot return to a previous state of sinful being. Once a soul completes the ritual trials associated with a terrace's sin and passes through the gate to the next level, it is impossible to go back.

For the damned, this repetition becomes a compulsive but unwelcome reminder of their sin and a perverse memorial to the eternal life they lost through it. The souls in Purgatory, however, willingly endure their suffering as a just punishment that scourges the weight of sin from their souls, and consequently their spirit bodies.

“and even as I turned toward him, I asked:
What did the spirit of Romagna mean
when he said, 'Sharing cannot have a part'?

And his reply: He knows the harm that lies
in his worst vice; if he chastises it,
to ease its expiation do not wonder.”⁹²

Performing the ritual trials successfully relies on their capacity for suffering but ultimately releases them from the bonds of sin. The active engagement of the souls in their own discipline rewards them with purer souls and spirit bodies capable of progressing further through space, and thus provides the means for their eventual entry into Paradise.

⁹² Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XV



Figure 30. *Inferno* (1972-1775) from Paul Laffoley's triptych of the *Divine Comedy*.



Figure 31. *Purgatorio* (1972-1775) from Paul Laffoley's triptych of the *Divine Comedy*.

CHAPTER 4

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BODIES OF THE AVATAR

4. 1 Introduction to *World of Warcraft*

World of Warcraft (WoW) launched in 2004 and has become the dominant game in the MMOG category with over 10 million subscribers. With account subscriptions running US\$15/month, income from this single game provided the majority of game developer Blizzard Entertainment's 2007 \$1.2 billion revenue.⁹³ The setting builds off the Tolkien-inspired fantasy franchise created in Blizzard's earlier *Warcraft* computer games. These previous installations of the series fell in the real-time strategy (RTS) genre, in which the player acts as a general, controlling units of various types (such as footmen or peasants) and managing resources in order to complete mission quests and beat the opposing side's army to an end goal.

WoW, as a fantasy role-playing game (RPG), moves away from this style of play. The focus is more personal; instead of controlling armies over a vast map, the player works through the perspective of a unique character situated in the world.

⁹³ http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=17062.

She creates a character from scratch, choosing its race (or species), class (or role, such as warlock or paladin), gender, and appearance. The character gains experience points through combat and completing quests and gains higher levels with more experience. At each new level the character acquires more skills and abilities over the course of play. *WoW* offers open gameplay without a fixed end goal, and players can engage in other ways of play in addition to completing various tasks for quests and fighting. They may prefer to spend their time engaged in player-versus-player (PVP) combat, resource management, professional advancement and development (for trades such as tailoring or enchanting), or large-scale dungeon raids.

WoW's popularity has supplanted *Everquest* as the archetypal, addictive MMORPG in popular culture. Mainstream news outlets cover the game, Toyota used the game in its truck commercials, and the infamous television comedy series *South Park* based an episode on the game, complete with in-game machinima footage.⁹⁴ The game has consequently attracted much attention from academia and frequently appears in Game Studies research. Much of the data gathered by game sociology researcher Nick Yee's Daedalus Project has come from *WoW* servers and player surveys.⁹⁵ The game serves not just as subject

⁹⁴ Example stories:

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/09/technology/10warcraftqa.web.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20397322/>;

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/6951918.stm>

⁹⁵ <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/>

but also as colloquium and meeting site for some researchers.⁹⁶ The academic journal *Games and Culture* has devoted an entire volume to the game, while Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg recently edited a critical anthology of research focused on *WoW*.⁹⁷

4.2 Ubiquity of Embodied Metaphor in *WoW*

The in-game experience of *WoW* is rooted in somatic metaphor that translates game mechanics and conventions through bodies. The player moves through the game by means of an avatar, which frames the player's experience of the game as tool as well as personal representation. The somatic metaphor extends to the conventions used in the game, such as "eating" to regain "health." It appears in the physical capabilities and capacities avatars possess in interacting with the world and its inhabitants, framing what the avatar can do in the world as well as its exposure to the environment, or what can be done to it. Furthermore, the ritualistic nature of the action that comprises much of the gameplay focuses on and uses bodies as its medium. At the same time, the avatar exists as a body integrated in an environment whose geographic and symbolic structures anticipates and reinforces the embodied perspective in the game world.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ <http://www.digra.org/hardcore/hc15.html>

⁹⁷ *Games and Culture*, October 1 2006, Volume 1, No. 4; Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds. *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft® Reader (Representation and Mind Series)*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

⁹⁸ Carmen, 219

4.2.1 Embodiment and Constructed Space

As McGregor points out, all spaces in video games are constructed spaces, as designers establish the “characteristics and limits of the world.”⁹⁹ Even procedurally generated terrain for seemingly natural, outdoor areas is “defined by human intervention.”¹⁰⁰ She has documented how *WoW* uses buildings to “contain activity” and moderate “usage patterns from real life.”¹⁰¹ The built environment also reinforces embodiment by operating on the “body schema.” Carmen describes Merleau-Ponty’s concept as “the bundle of skills and capacities that constitute the body’s precognitive familiarity with itself and the world it inhabits” that acts as a “reference point that establishes a stable perceptual background” for our perceiving and interpreting the world.¹⁰² The experience of the avatar navigating the game world, then, develops the player’s perception of a virtual body schema. The landscape in *WoW* structures this perception using spatial controls implemented through direct and symbolic means.

Stormwind City is the racial capital for human characters and the symbolic capital for the Alliance faction. Its architecture is an idealized late medieval-early Renaissance style of masonry fortifications and half-timbered buildings. The paved city streets are immaculate, free of grime or debris (most unlike historical

⁹⁹ McGregor, 1

¹⁰⁰ McGregor, 1

¹⁰¹ McGregor, 7

¹⁰² Carmen, 220

medieval urban streets). The canals that separate the different districts contain clear, fresh water. The districts delineate distinct zones for Alliance racial groups, such as the night elf Park, and activities, such as commerce and character training (Figure 32).



Figure 32. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2003-2008). Water boundaries divide the districts of Stormwind City.



Figure 33. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2003-2008). Stormwind City evokes the heavenly City of the New Jerusalem in its symbolic architecture and structure.

The built environment of Stormwind is at once nostalgic and modern, heroic yet essentially urban. Its scale and character evoke the “idealized polis” of the Heavenly City of the New Jerusalem (Figure 33).¹⁰³ Medieval art and literature frequently depicted it as a “radiant” walled citadel, “an eternal resting place of peace and harmony, above and beyond the troubled material world.”¹⁰⁴ Wertheim

¹⁰³ Wertheim, 18

¹⁰⁴ Wertheim, 18

and Benedikt both see New Jerusalem as a place of wisdom and knowledge.¹⁰⁵ It is telling that Stormwind is the only Alliance that hosts trainers for all character classes and professions. A character making the pilgrimage to Stormwind can gain new skills and knowledge regardless of class. These in turn expand the character's capabilities in relation to movement through the game world and further advancement. Stormwind is a useful concentration of game resources on the mechanical level, but it is also a powerful metaphor of transcendent knowledge on the symbolic level.

The grim Undercity, the capital city of the undead Forsaken, stands in direct contrast to Stormwind City (Figure 33). The two faction's architecture reflects the complex, antagonistic relationship between their cultures and ways of being. Stormwind is the human capital and expresses the aspirations and hopes of the dominant human culture in the game world. The Forsaken, allied with the rival macro-faction The Horde, were once human themselves, until a plague destroyed them and turned them into the living dead.

¹⁰⁵ Wertheim, 29, 258



Figure 34. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2003-2008). The symbolic and geographic orientation and organization of Undercity resembles that of Dante's *Inferno*.

Thus, their city replaces the human capital's pristine walls and bright spaces with decay and darkness, and its citadel with tunnels and catacombs. (Despite its dilapidated appearance, Undercity is ironically the more recently constructed of the two cities, according to the *Warcraft* timeline.) The ruined castle, with its crumbling walls and broken statues, that sits atop the city mocks the monumental architecture of Stormwind's Valley of Heroes. The moats at this upper level

contain eerie glowing slime – an inversion of the clear, pure water in the canals of Stormwind. Elevators at crypt level, guarded by monstrous patch-work creatures, connect the surface ruins to Undercity proper. (This inverts the orientation of human architecture in the game, where the lifeless crypts are below ground, and the business of life goes takes place on the surface, where multi-story buildings house reach toward the sky.) Undercity is roughly organized along concentric circles at different levels; these demarcate areas of communication, commerce, and training. The green goo is present here, as well, in concentric canals that separate the rings of the city.



Figure 35. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2003-2008). Undercity uses a concentric spatial model and a descending orientation, much like the Inferno.

Undercity uses inversion as a spatial construction of meaning much in the same way that Dante does in the *Commedial* (Figure 34). In addition, the similarities in the symbolic geography between the Inferno and Undercity are striking. They both employ a spatial model of concentric circles along a vertical axis. The axis of power in both places is also vertical, with the orientation pointing down; Sylvanas, the banshee ruler of the Forsaken, stands at the lowest point of Undercity's vertical structure, like Satan frozen in Cocytus. As the capital city of the undead Forsaken, Undercity recalls Dis, the infernal city of the Pit. Human characters find it as difficult to traverse as Dante and his guide did in the *Inferno*.

"The kindly master said: "My son, the city
that bears the name of Dis is drawing near,
with its grave citizens, its great battalions."

"So we arrived inside the deep-cut trenches
that are the moats of this despondent land:
the ramparts seemed to me to be of iron."¹⁰⁶

The internal geography of Undercity echoes the topography of the Inferno in other ways. The goo-filled moats and sewers in Undercity reference the alluvial boundary trope so common to mythic underworld spaces, such as the chthonic rivers that Dante borrowed from classical Greek and Roman mythology. The alluvial boundary trope also appears in the canals of Stormwind. This seems out of place in *WoW*'s New Jerusalem only until we consider the River Lethe, flowing

¹⁰⁶ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VIII

from the top of Mount Purgatory. Dante placed it in the Earthly Paradise as a symbol of compassion and holy love, even though it is an explicitly chthonic river.¹⁰⁷ The aesthetic and topographic inversions of the Undercity and Stormwind are a re-imagining of chthonic geography and spatial constructions of meaning from mythic underworlds.

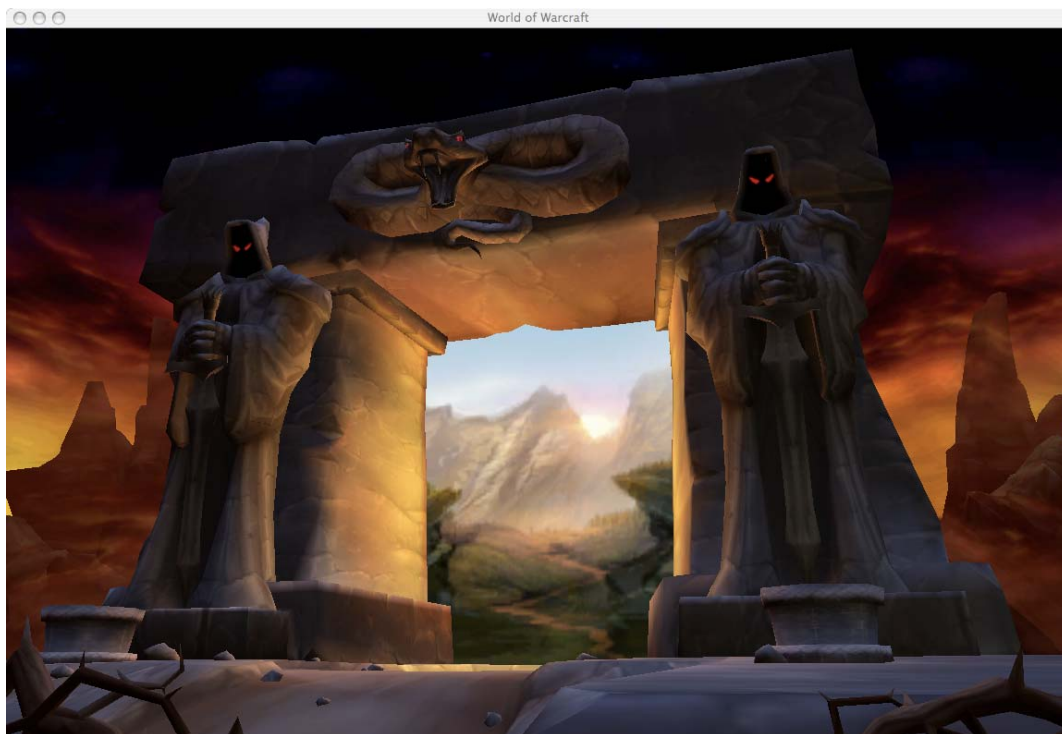


Figure 36. The login screen for *World of Warcraft* recalls gate imagery and symbolism from multiple underworld mythologies as well as Dante's *Commedia*.

¹⁰⁷ In classical Greek and Roman mythology, drinking the waters of the Lethe caused one to forget one's past life. In the *Purgatorio*, it causes one to forget one's past sins and pain.

4.3 The Avatar as Body

The avatar in *WoW* possesses three aspects, each being a particular kind of body. The first enables the embodiment of the player in the game world from a functional as well as a social perspective. On the one hand, the player transmits his intention through the avatar, using it like a pointer or cursor in the game. But the avatar is also the player's subjective position in the game; it is the projection plane for him to see himself in the world, and for others to see him sharing the game world with them.

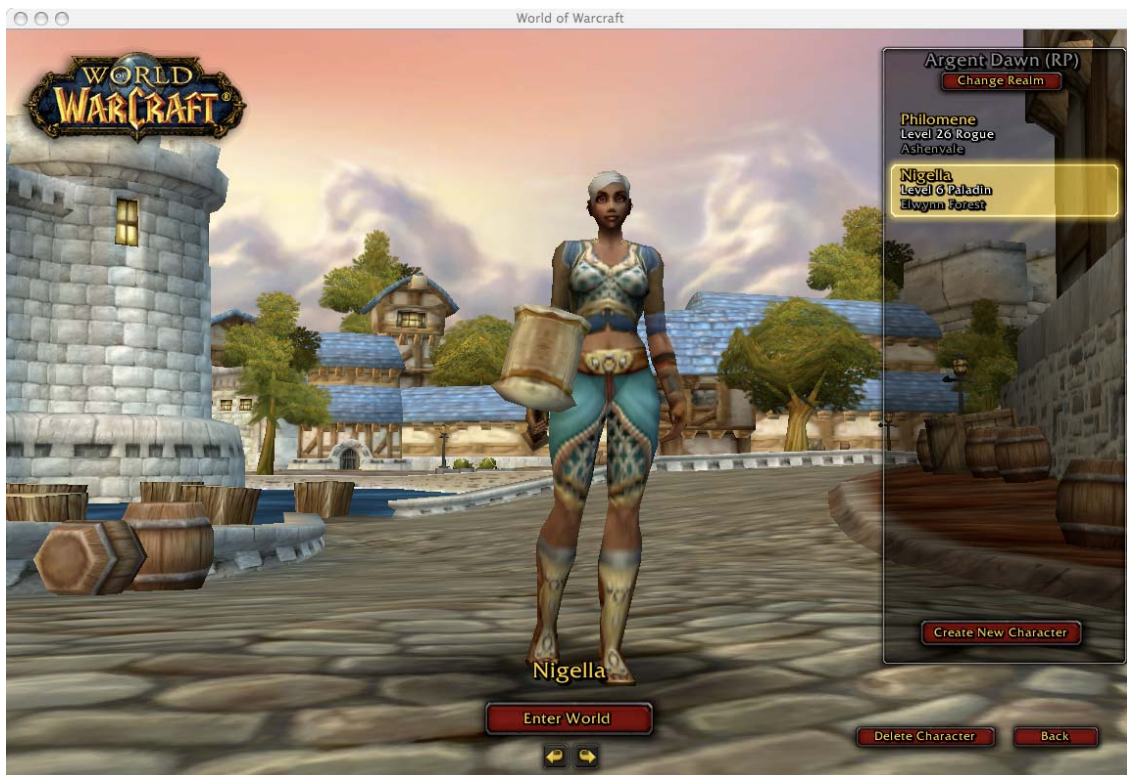


Figure 37. *World of Warcraft* character screen. Human buildings in the game reference medieval architecture through a filter of idealized cleanliness and order.

We can think of this aspect of the avatar as an idealized spiritual body, acting as an example of the “cyber-soul” Wertheim discusses.¹⁰⁸ In its second aspect the avatar acts as a body within the fictional space of the game world, one that embodies the game conventions and eats, drinks, fights and dies as part of its “physical” existence in the game. When that “physical” body dies, the avatar takes on the third aspect, the form of a soul in a state of limbo tied to the “material plane” of the game world. The space through which it travels is spatially identical to that in which the “living” dwell in the game, but the diegetic soul body experiences it differently.

4.2.1 As “Cyber” Body

The avatar creation process in *WoW* allows player to pick the race (referring to species rather than ethnicity), gender, and class (role or vocation) for her character. These choices all alter the character’s appearance, and players may make their decisions based on the aesthetic impact that these factors have on their avatars.¹⁰⁹ Yee’s surveys have suggested that players prefer more attractive avatars, reinforcing Wertheim’s observation that in virtual worlds “anyone who wants to can at least pretend to the illusion of perfection.”¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰⁸ Wertheim 268-273.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor 13-16

¹¹⁰ Wertheim 25. See also Nick Yee’s analysis of *WoW* character demographics (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001368.php>).

customization of physical characteristics is limited to a set number of faces, hair styles, and piercings. While the range of options varies based on race and gender, they form typical MMO avatars: generally fit and young.¹¹¹ Markers of age and infirmity are conspicuously absent. It is through these idealized forms that players move through and experience the game world, like the glorified bodies of the blessed in the Heavenly City of New Jerusalem (figure 38).¹¹²



Figure 38. Stormwind City, the human racial capital in *World of Warcraft*, suggests the Heavenly City of New Jerusalem imagined in the middle ages.

¹¹¹ The undead character models are largely an exception to this generalization. Their soft tissue appears in better condition, however, than one would expect in a rotting revenant corpse; the female model has robust breasts, for instance. Similarly, one can create a human male avatar with a bald or receding hairline. But while this hair style would imply an older character, the model retains the young, “linebacker” physique that is the default.

¹¹² Benedikt 14-16

Game avatars may even improve upon these perfect forms. As Michael Heim has observed, the virtual bodies we choose in cyberspace free “us from the restrictions of our physical identities.”¹¹³ Thus the avatar as cyber-soul leads not just to a new iteration of the transcendent New Jerusalem celebrated in the middle ages, but also to a heavenly city where one can spend eternity in the glorified body *of one’s own choosing* (figure 37). Wertheim has criticized many of the expressions of cyber-immortality for borrowing the dualism of the Pythagorean soul without its moral context.¹¹⁴ In these fantasies of cyberspace immortality, she writes, “the soul’s eternity entails no ethical demands, no moral responsibilities. One gets the immortality payoff of a religion, but without any of the obligations.”¹¹⁵ The program of quests and physical trials that forms the core gameplay in *WoW*, however, suggests the ritualized harrowing that prepared the souls in Dante’s Purgatory for their entry into paradise. The exertion made in overcoming these challenges in the game has the possibility of imbuing the player with the transformative wisdom absent from the utopian, self-determined fantasy of cyber-souls Wertheim deplores.

¹¹³ Heim (1993) 100

¹¹⁴ Wertheim 271

¹¹⁵ Wertheim 271

4.2.2 Avatar As Tool

The avatar embodies the access point and subjective perspective for the player's experience in the game. By moving the avatar through the environment the player "points" at the objects with which she wishes to interact, or the direction in which to proceed.¹¹⁶ The avatar is a contextual interface, working in conjunction with the game geography to determine the possible actions available to the player. It operates in conjunction with the functional architecture described by McGregor; the buildings act as containers that spatially organize activity.¹¹⁷ The player must move the avatar to the bank in order to withdraw items that were previously deposited; the set of bank-related actions cannot be enacted anywhere else.

4.2.3 Conventions: Body as Interactive Metaphor

Core gameplay mechanisms express themselves as embodied conventions that act on or through the avatar body. *WoW* continues the RPG tradition of using heavy statistical computation as the structure that determines action and probability.¹¹⁸ The modeling of physical capability and capacity is expressed in

¹¹⁶ Frasca 2001

¹¹⁷ McGregor 2-3

¹¹⁸ TSR's seminal fantasy RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) introduced this stats-based game structure, which has since become a standard model in computer games, due in part to its inherently procedural nature. Ironically, the most recent editions of D&D (3, 3.5

the game as numbers, but also in the representation of the avatar as a “physical” being.

4.3.3.1 The Metaphor of Health

“Health” is an excellent example of this. In the game, it is a value that describes how much damage the avatar body can sustain before “death.” This capacity appears as a green bar in the interface, and when the player rolls over the graphic with the mouse it shows the numeric value of current number of “health points” and the total possible.¹¹⁹ But the body of the avatar does not reflect changes in health, and one cannot discern the current health status of a character by looking at the avatar. Philomene the troll rogue moves identically and appears the same physically at 200 health points as she does at 1900.¹²⁰

The avatar loses health points in multiple situations. The most common is when attacked successfully by an enemy in combat. This is a form of spatial control, as geographic zone determines mob distribution. Falling from heights also incurs damage, and falls can be fatal. This control through the vertical is relative,

and 4th Editions) have adopted the gameplay conventions of console RPGs and MMOs, a direction resented by many “old school” D&D players I know.

¹¹⁹ “Health points” continues the established RPG convention of “hit points.” This convention has grown beyond its RPG roots and appears widely across genres in video games.

¹²⁰ Philomene’s profile may be viewed on the *WoW* Armory, a database pulling from Blizzard’s live servers: <http://www.WoWarmory.com/character-sheet.xml?r=Argent+Dawn&n=Philomene>

though; because the avatar's total possible health value increases with each level, a character at level thirty may walk away from a fall that would have been fatal at level ten.



Figure 39. The fatigue mechanism controls player avatars even in death. Here, a player's avatar had died as a consequence of fatigue while swimming in deep water. The ghost avatar has just died from the same cause while trying to retrieve the body on a "corpse run."

Water provides as an even more explicit control that operates through "health" to define and enforce spatial boundaries. Avatars can enter and swim in the many bodies of water located in the game world. They cannot swim for extended

periods in deep water, and this limit is enforced through the “fatigue” mechanic.¹²¹

A fatigue counter bar appears when the avatar crosses into a designated deep water zone. When the counter reaches zero, the character begins to take fatigue damage and will die if it does not return to shallower water (figure 39). The fatigue mechanism creates an additional control, one that literally surrounds the player experience, to discipline avatar bodies. In this way spatial control of avatar bodies is enforced invisibly even in areas without topographic barriers or threats from mobs.

4.3.3.2 Health and Ritual

Health is ritualized in the mechanics for healing and resting. The avatar can regain lost points in several ways. Passive regeneration occurs automatically, albeit slowly. Players can use healing potions and spells, as well as bandages, to replace health points more quickly. (These all bear a limitation; once used, the player cannot use another until a “cooldown” period, which can be a number of seconds to minutes, ends.) By far the most elaborate system in the game for restoring health (and the most ritualized) is through food.

¹²¹ The fatigue mechanism is largely a response by Blizzard to players’ attempts to swim across the Great Sea to the other continents. This isn’t actually possible, since the continents reside on different servers (much like instanced dungeons) from each other. There are some strange sights, such as the End of the World Beach and the Corner of the World (the edge of the game world’s geometry), to see if one manages to go far enough. Players have achieved this through an exploit using a level one priest and continued healing.

Using a food item involves a more complex sequence of required actions than the other methods of renewing health points. The avatar must sit while eating; standing or moving interrupts the ritual, and the food item ceases to add points. The avatar must remain in this position for an extended period of time, during which the food item will incrementally restore the health up to the prescribed limit for one portion of that food. Some foods confer an additional, temporary bonus to the avatar's attribute numbers (such as adding 1 to its spirit) if the avatar remains in the eating pose for a sufficiently long time.

Beverages restore the "mana" of spell casters in the same way that food heals health points. The game uses "mana" as the value that describes how many points are available to spend on magic spells, but the concept comes originally from Polynesian religious belief. There, it expressed an impersonal, but directed, supernatural force that worked to affect everything outside the normal power of man and the common processes of nature.¹²² Sacrifices to the gods fed their mana, and when worshippers consumed these sacrifices, they would then absorb some of the god's mana.¹²³ This religious subtext reinforces the ritual nature of the embodied metaphors that the game mechanics employ. In *WoW*, ritualizing these basic mechanisms shifts the emphasis away from the profane

¹²² Valeri 95

¹²³ "To eat is to encompass, to possess, to transform... it is necessary for the sacrificer to eat the offering so that he may absorb the power, or divine mana, that has been incorporated into it as a consequence" of its having been absorbed on an invisible plane by the god. Valeri 56.

act of eating (or of adding numbers to a value) towards the embodied opportunities for spiritual transcendence.

4.3.3.3 Abstract Embodiment: the Example of Reputation

Other, less explicitly physical information shares this ambiguous abstract/embodied expression. “Reputation,” for example, is a numeric value that is increased by achieving certain states in the game, such as having completed a quest for a faction, that in turn affects the availability or cost of some resources. Reputation, as a game mechanic in *WoW* and as a phenomenon in real life, is also an embodied phenomenon, however, in that it reflects situational action and social meaning.¹²⁴ These different aspects bleed into one another in the game. The idea of reputation carries a set of socially meaningful values (such as dependable, honorable, reliable, noteworthy) from outside the fictional game world. In the game, reputation expresses the constructive social connection and relationship one has with a particular faction; more reputation indicates that the player has performed more tasks or has had greater interaction with a particular faction. Reputation also functions in the game mechanics as an abstract numeric value, and one effect of increased reputation is making new resources available to the player. Thus one might earn reputation in the form of an abstract numerical value from a social interaction, like killing a player of the opposing faction on a battleground. Enough reputation (or honor, a closely related value and mechanic)

¹²⁴ Dourish (2001), 116, 121-126

would allow the player to acquire a particular rare weapon. Equipping this new resource might increase the character's numeric "stats" and therefore the capabilities to act in the game world. It also makes the difficult-to-acquire item visible to other players, thus connecting back to embodied social meaning. The sway of valuable in-game artifacts can be powerful enough to affect social interaction outside the game world. Players may violate *WoW's* terms of use and purchase in-game gold outside of the game using real currency, in order to afford the rarest ("epic") items inside the game. The seductive pull of epic and rare equipment (and the respect and envy that they engender among other players) has resulted in more serious forays into criminal behavior among players in the real world.¹²⁵

4.3.3.4 Visible Reputation: Mounts

Mounts are an excellent example of how this commingling of abstract numbers and embodied meaning happens in the game. Players with enough gold may purchase riding animals after level forty, and achieving this is a deeply important ritual milestone for *WoW* players. An equivalent marker in life outside the game would be a teenager receiving a driver's license; both reflect passing out of a juvenile or dependant stage into a social role with more independence and responsibility. Both also confer greater spatial access.

¹²⁵ Consider the recent conviction of Qiu Chengwei for the murder of a fellow *Legend of Mir 3* player who had sold the extremely rare in-game sword he had loaned the victim. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4072704.stm>)

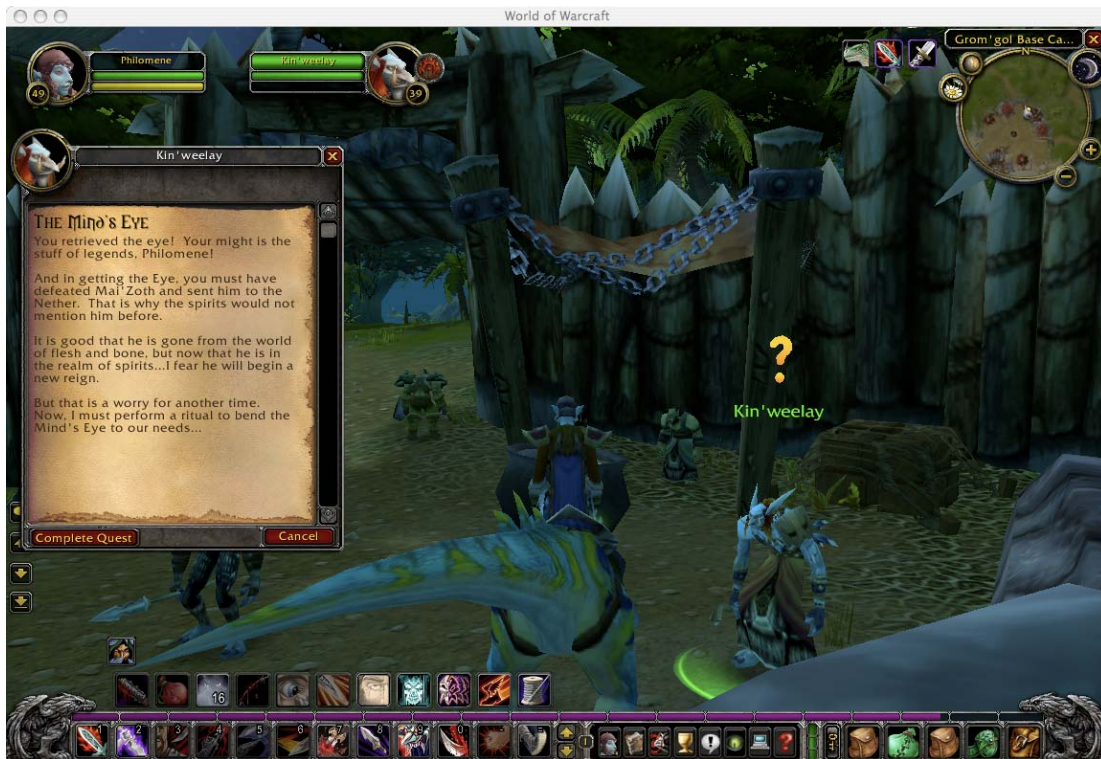


Figure 40. *World of Warcraft*. Quest-giver NPC discusses the Twisting Nether, the realm of spirits where the dead are said to go. Note that the mount (*the striped raptor, center*) greatly increases the avatar's height relative to the environment and other bodies.

Mounts significantly change the avatar's capability to act in the game world, as basic mounts increase travel speed by 40%; this dramatically increases the agency of the avatar and loosens the spatial controls on its body. (Among other things, mounted players can outrun many mobs, consequently making riding safer than going by foot.) Faster terrestrial and even flying mounts are available at higher character levels, having an even greater effect on avatar capability and

spatial freedom. The capability of flight enables the avatar to transcend the spatial controls associated with the terrestrial geometry.

Reputation determines which riding animals players may purchase. Players can acquire the mount for their character's race without any reputation qualification. Earning enough reputation from another racial faction, however, enables a player to purchase the mount peculiar to that group. This difficult achievement is highly spectacular and communicates a player's high status and resources (in terms of time devoted to "rep farming" and adequate gold for the significant expense) to other players.¹²⁶

4.2.4 Avatar As Physical Body

The avatar has a second aspect, the incarnation of a "living" character that exists within the material fiction of the game world. The physical body of the avatar obeys the rule set of the physical game world, such as collision detection, but it also conforms to the game world's embedded cultural and environmental models.

All bodies are not equal. There are player avatar bodies (with their multiple aspects), but also non-player character (NPC) bodies, mobile creature ("mob")

¹²⁶ The official game guide makes this very clear: "However, you will first need to obtain "exalted" reputation status with that race in order to do so. At this point this is very difficult to do, if not impossible." It's not impossible for dedicated players, but it is very difficult and cross-mounted players are still relatively uncommon. (<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/mounts.html>)

bodies, and “boss” or “elite” creature bodies. Different rules control these different types of bodies. Additionally, avatar bodies exist in *WoW* in different ontological states, as they can experience the world in both “life” and “death.” The rule sets controlling the capabilities and capacities of the avatar differ depending on the state, however.

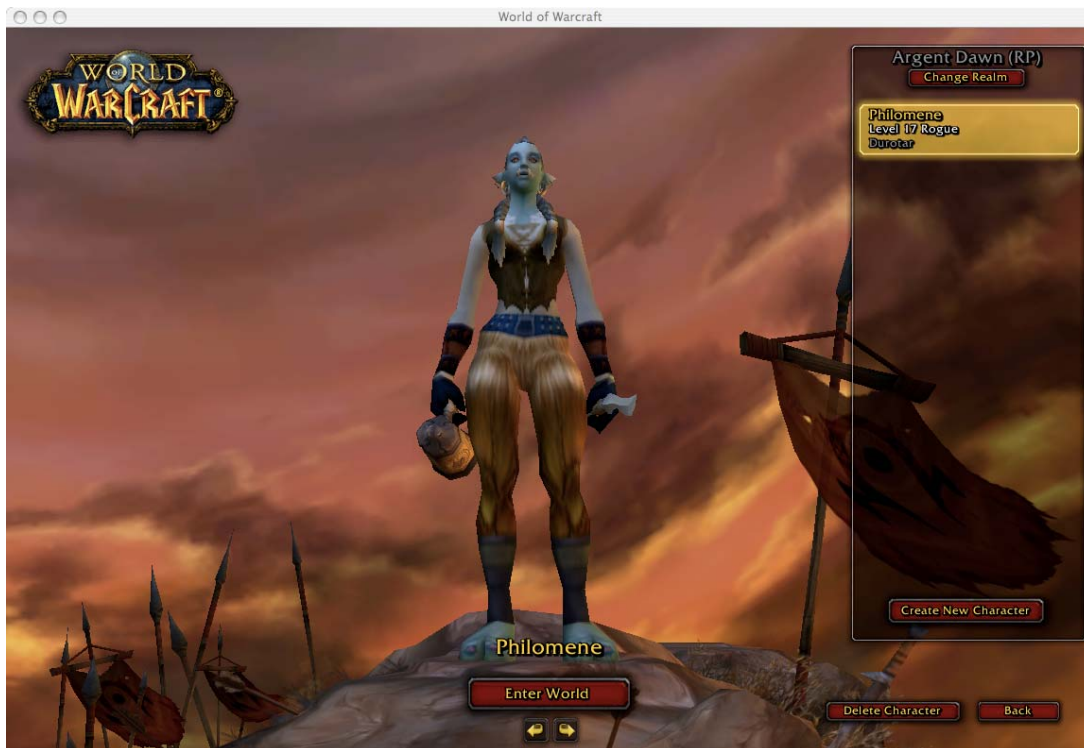


Figure 41. *World of Warcraft* character screen. Character belonging to the Horde faction appears in front of a background that suggests strife, fire, and violence. Compare to the utopian background in the human character screen (Alliance faction) from figure 36.

4.3.4.1 Categories of Being: Player Avatars in Life

Player avatars have the potential to change functionally rather than superficially. Over the course of the game, the character gains improved physical and skill capabilities as it accumulates experience points. “Experience” is a key game mechanic that controls crucial development thresholds of the avatar’s body, but it is also controlled in turn by its spatial component.

4.3.4.1.1 Experience as Spatial Control

The experience mechanic structures much of how the character progresses through the game. Another embodied metaphor, it uses game rules and structures modeled on the assumption that a person receives rewards of wisdom and proficiency through repeated activity. Characters can gain new spells, skills and abilities as they gain levels, and experience points are the symbolic currency of this development. Characters earn experience points either by killing mobs near or higher than their own level, exploring new regions, or by completing quests. All these activities require players to engage with the environment on a physical basis. The mobs also act as a means of spatial control for the player’s

engagement with the world, though, regardless of how she pursues experience points.

Mobs reward experience points depending on the relationship of their levels with that of the avatar. Lower level mobs are weaker than the character and return increasingly fewer points, to the point that creatures more than 5 levels below the character will not return any experience. Higher-level creatures are stronger and more dangerous to the character. They reward more experience points, however, because they involve more risk and require more effort to kill.

The distribution of mobs creates geographic boundaries that control where the avatar can pass. There are rarely explicit limitations on a player's movement.¹²⁷ Instead, the game uses the threat embodied in higher-level mobs to constrain players to level-appropriate areas. Venturing beyond exposes the avatar to escalated violence, as mobs are more likely to attack a character lower than their level. Conversely, mobs ignore characters of sufficiently higher level. Consequently, a region like Stranglethorn Vale (with creatures in the thirty to forty-five level range) may promise instant death to a level ten character while simultaneously offering minimal reaction to a character at level fifty. Enduring the physical trials of combat with "appropriate" mobs rewards the character with the means to transcend physical threats embodied in the world's geography.

¹²⁷ The level 58 threshold hard-coded into the Dark Portal is one exception. Characters lower than the threshold may not cross over into Outland, a ruined planet surrounded by the Twisting Nether.

4.3.4.2 Categories of Being: Player Avatars in Death

Avatar death has a unique ritual process unavailable to other bodies. When killed, the player releases the character's "spirit," and avatar takes on the spirit body form (discussed in detail below). The spirit body cannot interact with the world, even though it is subject to its "physical" rules that control it spatially (such as object collision and the fatigue mechanism). The character cannot fight, complete quests, aid other players, or engage NPCs in conversation of commerce.

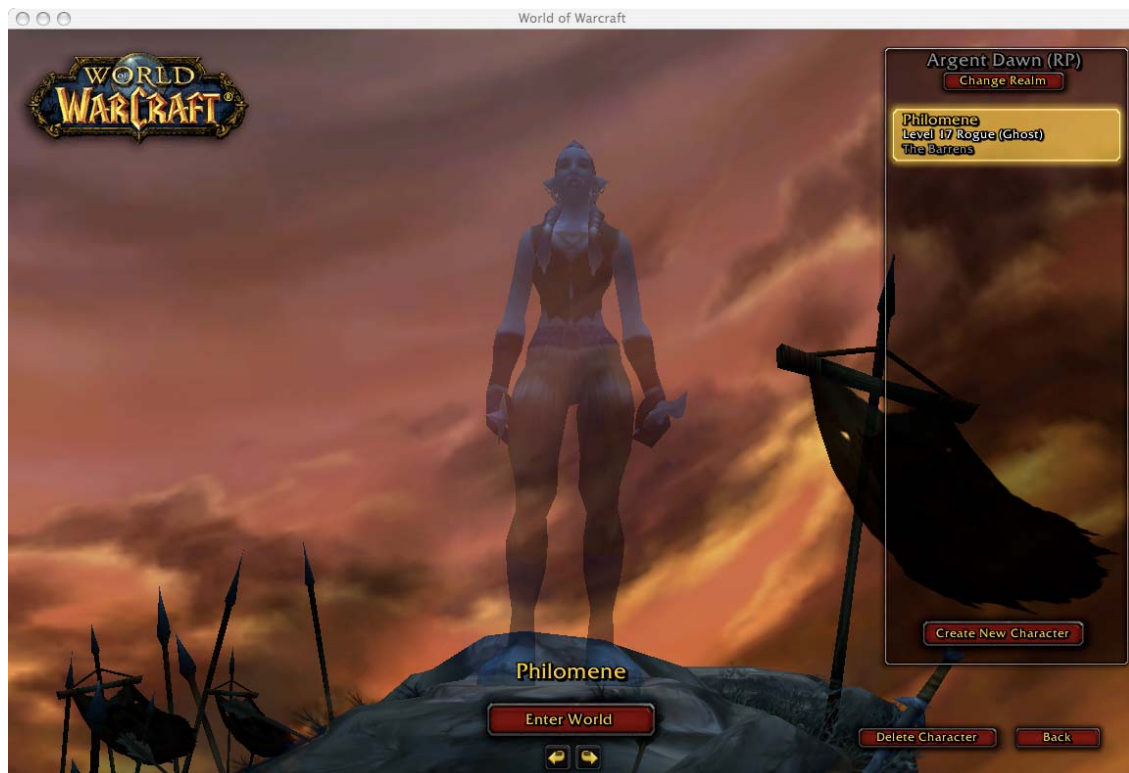


Figure 42. *World of Warcraft* character screen. Player avatars continue to exist in the game world after death as ghosts.

The goal of the spirit body is to resurrect the avatar's "dead" body. The player has the option of performing the "corpse run" or resurrection by a Spirit Healer. The corpse run involves traveling by foot to the location when the character was killed and resurrecting there at partial health (and mana, if a magic user). When the player consents, the spirit body becomes into the "live" avatar body, and the dead avatar body lying in the world disappears, leaving behind a skeleton that gradually disintegrates over time.

Resurrection by Spirit Healer is more convenient than the corpse run but carries a heavier price. Equipment has a mechanic equivalent to the avatar's "health" called "durability." Weapons and armor will break when their durability reaches zero; they effectively "die" at that point and must be "resurrected" through a qualified vendor's repairs.¹²⁸ The Spirit Healer returns the character to life where the spirit body stands (in a graveyard), but the player must sacrifice a portion of his avatar's armor and weaponry durability in return. In addition, the avatar must endure a period of resurrection sickness, in which its physical attributes and defense are reduced by seventy-five percent. These offerings are significant in a game world where so much of the avatar's activity involves combat. The ritual cost also means that death often exposes the avatar to additional (though temporary) limitations on its capabilities - while enabling greater capacity for injury in the game world.

¹²⁸ This bears similarity to meso-american ritual sacrifices of ceramics, which were symbolically "killed" by piercing their sides. (See Lujan 2005.)

4.3 Categories of Being: Avatar As Soul Body

Avatars can die in the game. When this happens, the game experience changes in several ways. The environment takes on a different appearance; the light is muted and colors are desaturated. The sky fills with twisting, swirling, multi-color clouds, and the player cannot see the bodies of living players or creatures.¹²⁹ The avatar takes on a ghostly appearance and exists as a “soul body” (figure 42). The character’s skills and mount cannot be used, and the player cannot use emote communications or public chat channels. Nor can the spirit body use items in inventory like food or drink, which act on the body. The spirit body runs more quickly than the live body, though, and it can travel on the surface of water.

The spirit body is otherwise still bound by the game’s rule set for physics and collision, so this ostensibly ethereal form interacts with the game’s “material” world in much the same way as the living body. The spirit body is immune to attack at lower levels, but it is possible to be killed. The cause of this second death can be environmental, when incurred by fatigue. Any avatar that dies from fatigue in deep water far enough from land risks dying in spirit form on the “corpse run” when retrieving its body for resurrection.

¹²⁹ One exception to this “life blindness” is live bodies near the avatar’s corpse. Blizzard enacted this measure to prevent “corpse camping” by PvP players, and to give the dead character warning if a mob were too close to resurrect safely.

The swirling multi-color sky in the game world when the avatar is “dead” has been linked with the underworld of Warcraft lore, the Twisting Nether.



Figure 43. The Dark Portal to Outland is closed to characters below the level 58 threshold. The surrounds Outland lies in the midst of the Twisting Nether, a liminal area identified in Warcraft lore as the realm of spirits and the dead.

This region is an ambiguous area in Warcraft lore. As an ethereal network, it connects the many astral and material worlds of the diegetic universe.¹³⁰ It is also home to demons and has been called the game’s underworld.

¹³⁰ From the official Warcraft lore.
(<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/story/chapter1.html>)

“The Twisting Nether is sometimes described as the realm of death, or realm of spirits, and is thought to be a place where spirits of the dead go upon death. This may explain the twisting rotating sky seen in the so called "spirit realm" that players see when they are killed in World of Warcraft.”¹³¹

This suggestion is intriguing, because the Twisting Nether can be explored by living avatars in the game. However, safe access is limited to those who have reached the highest achievements; characters exploring the region must have reached level seventy and have purchased flying mounts. Thus, while the player's journey through the game's challenges and physical trials can be read as a journey of spiritual purification and progression, it also leads literally to a form of spirit world or afterlife.

The spirit body simultaneously frees the avatar and constrains it in the game world. It has greater mobility at lower levels than its living form, while lacking the risk that traveling through the world poses for live avatars. Death, however, is not transcendental. It merely leads to a resumption of the avatar's life in the game.

WoW's game world references and depicts geographic underworlds like

Undercity and mythic underworlds like the Twisting Nether, but its formal

¹³¹ From the fan-organized *WoWWiki*, an online reference of exceptional depth. This site catalogs the content of the comprehensive Warcraft franchise, including novels, board games, table-top role playing books and other Warcraft video games in addition to *WoW*. (http://www.WoWWiki.com/Twisting_Nether)

structure also recapitulates the poetics of the underworld. The afterlife starts and ends in the game world of the living avatar.



Figure 44. *World of Warcraft*. The Dark Portal recalls the gate from the login screen. Here it leads to Outland.

4.4 Categories of Being: Other Bodies

Other bodies do not possess the capability to change over time; this is true for NPCs, regular mobs, elite mobs and bosses. They exist in a repetitive cycle whose steps follow established rules. Their movements are circumscribed to a set area and their behavior does not vary. In “death” they leave a temporary

corpse that within minutes will fade and leave no trace. Death is a temporary state, for they reappear in the same place (or “re-spawn”), in the same form, and return to their previous ritual patterns.¹³² These ritual patterns also define the spatial limits for their movement. Mobs, bosses and NPCs spawn at prescribed points on the map, at prescribed intervals between death and resurrection. To watch their existence in the game is to see not a life that stretches indefinitely but rather an endlessly repeating slice of a life.



Figure 45. *World of Warcraft*. Night elf with the Great Bear Spirit, a quest-giver ghost NPC. There are living and ghost NPCs; they exist according to the same rules and conventions.

¹³² Some creatures may re-spawn so quickly that a player may encounter a location filled with one live mob walking among several of its own dead bodies.

Some NPCs, such as the spectral Captain Grayson of the Westfall Lighthouse and the Great Bear Spirit in Moonglade (figure 45), appear in the game as ghosts rather than living characters. Their “soul bodies” follow the same rule sets that control “living” NPC bodies, however; they wait or move according to scripted patterns. There is little ontological difference how the game treats the “soul body” of the dead night elf Yalda and how it treats the “living” residents of her village in Darkshore.



Figure 46. *World of Warcraft*. Mobs and other creatures in the game can also be living or ghost bodies. Like the NPCs, this distinction makes no difference in the rules and conventions that govern them.

There is a great difference between these static NPC and mob bodies and player avatars, however. The 3D models retain the same geometry and textures (excluding those relating to equipped gear) in all groups. Thus they may *appear* to be superficially equivalent, and this is true in terms of their capacity to be injured or controlled by the game's rule structure. Player avatars, however, have the unique capacity for transformation through their experience to expand their unique capabilities and change their position in the rule structure. Like the penitents in Dante's Purgatory, player avatars have a future. The NPCs and mobs, on the other hand, resemble the damned of the Inferno – trapped in an endless loop of ritualized action, consigned to their allotted space in the spiritual landscape with no hope of transcendence.

4.5 Ritual and the Body

Ritual pervades the action and gameplay in *WoW* and frames the experience of the avatar. Ritual also has an important place in the lore and fiction of the game world. The lore, developed by Blizzard over the course of the Warcraft franchise in computer games, board games, collectable card games, novels, and table-top role-playing games, narrates a complex history of war, intrigue and struggle among dozens of races and factions across multiple planes of existence. The epic nature of this background, however, largely distances its relevance to the immediate game experience. Ritual impacts the game experience more directly

through the diegesis of the game world, with its quests, trainers, and combat, than through the elaborate backstory.

“For many of Azeroth's inhabitants, combat on both a grand scale and at the level of individual skirmishes has become ritualistic and in some ways even ceremonial. This page documents some of the ongoing confrontations and celebrations in the game - and those events in between which the line has blurred.”¹³³

4.5.1 Ritual and Advancement

Players have reported that progress was a primary force motivating them to play MMOs.¹³⁴ Advancement in *WoW* is an embodied process structured by ritual. Experience controls the thresholds for advancement, and the avatar automatically receives boons to its physical statistics. In order to gain new skills and abilities, characters must make an additional petition to their trainers, the gatekeepers of their classes' knowledge and lore. This involves traveling to one of the cities where that character's class trainers reside. (Not all cities have all classes of trainers, so learning new abilities can involve significant travel.) New abilities become available every other level, and the player may learn new skills

¹³³ From Blizzard's official community site, page describing the different seasonal events during the year. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/community/ingameevents.html>

¹³⁴ <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001612.php?page=2>

in exchange for a monetary sum. The exchange of knowledge is abstract, though, and the transaction takes on a largely ritual role.

4.5.2 Holy Days in Azeroth

Blizzard has an annual schedule of holidays that are celebrated in *WoW*'s game world. Most of these are based on real-world holidays and traditional celebrations from western and Asian cultures, and each typically lasts for one to two weeks in the game world.

4.5.2.1 Holidays in WoW and Real-life Equivalents

<u>WoW Holiday</u>	<u>RL Equivalent</u>	<u>Month/Season</u>
New Year's Eve	New Year's Eve	January
Lunar Festival	Lunar New Year	February
Love Is In the Air	Valentines Day	February
Noblegarden	Easter	March
Children's Week	Children's Day (Japan)	May
Midsummer Fire Festival	St. John's Day/Midsummer;	
	Summer Solstice	June/July
Harvest Festival	Harvest Moon; Memorial Day	September
Brewfest	Oktoberfest	September/October
Hallow's End	Halloween	October
Winter's Veil	Christmas; Winter Solstice	December

Each holiday has a distinct character and atmosphere in the game world, but they share similar opportunities and features for players. Holiday-themed quests are available, with holiday-related rewards such as clothing, food, drink, and profession patterns or recipes. Cities sport holiday decorations, and NPCs in festival clothing talk about the festival and give entry quests to point revelers in the right direction.

That the *WoW* holidays follow both the timing and conventions of significant real-world holidays underscores their basis not just as celebrations but also their ritualistic aspect as holy days. Most of the equivalent festivals have persisted for hundreds (or thousands of years) and reflect pre-modern religious calendars.¹³⁵

4.5.2.2 Brewfest: Tipsy Trolls and Drunken Dwarves

Brewfest celebrates drink, dwarven culture, drink, food, drink, and more drink. The apparent dissonance of having a festival dedicated to physical appetites in a virtual world makes this one of the most productive to study. What appears to be an absurdity is actually consistent with the ritualistic nature of embodiment in the game and the embodied conventions that its gameplay employs.

¹³⁵ Equivalent festivals also come from religious calendars of pre-modern societies that had strong conceptions of Underworld, as well.

Despite its “roots” in dwarven culture, both the Alliance and the Horde factions celebrate Brewfest, and the festival is enormously popular among players. Celebration pavilions sit outside the entrances of the capital cities of Ironforge and Ogrimmar, with an assortment of vendors selling food and drink, and NPCs offering festival-specific quests, while the other capitals have complimentary beer gardens.

Drinking alcoholic beverages is the primary activity and focus of Brewfest, or rather – watching avatars drink virtual alcoholic beverages is the primary activity. Some beverages have character level requirements for consumption, with stronger brews only available to characters above a certain level. Progression through the game strengthens the avatars body even in this ritual context, enabling it to withstand the “powerful” drink.

4.6 The Avatar as Ultimately Transcendental Body

The avatar’s journey through the game is a story of ritual, purgation and transcendence. The avatar begins the journey as a fragile, controlled and “incomplete” being. The mental and physical ordeals of ritualized quests and “grinding” are discipline that works upon the avatar body. These challenges are the path to perfection, where the avatar reaches an end state in which it is strong, mobile, and whole. It has reached a perfected state; while “buffs” from

equipment and magic may temporarily improve the characters attributes, no further material improvement can be made to its body or abilities. The character has achieved the highest level possible, so there can be no more growth of its attributes (stats) through experience. It has reached the end of its class talent tree and can learn no more skills or feats. It has acquired all the knowledge available to it in the world.

The purgatory of the leveling process enables the level-seventy avatar to enter a new state of being: the end game. The end game, or the game one plays when one has “finished” the game, has historically appeared in limited form in video games of many types, but it has become an expected, major component of MMOs. There are multiple reasons for this evolution. A rich end game rewards the months of work a player has invested in leveling her character, but it also helps preserve the revenue stream from that player’s monthly subscription.

WoW’s end game has become increasingly distinct and separate from the leveling-in-world experience, to the point that people engaged in arena competition, for instance, are playing a fundamentally different game from those below the level-seventy level cap. Because their rarified capabilities change their virtual body schemata, level-seventy character perceive a very different world, even though they continue to occupy the same geographic space as characters beneath the level-seventy cap. Theirs is a transcendental world, and one that -

like Paradise- excludes those who have not yet reached the threshold by completing their purgation. And - like Beatrice meeting Dante on Mount Purgatory – level-seventy characters may still "descend" to the "lower" realm of the leveling-in-world game and the social systems associated with it. Level-seventy characters dancing in front of Stormwind's auction house are hardly an exhortation to piety, but they are a spectacular example of the rewards of diligence and sacrifice to low-level characters still enduring the purgatory of grinding.

The avatar faces physical challenges and trials along its journey with often-fatal consequences. Death, however, is largely symbolic, and there are very few beings in the game for whom being "dead" is a permanent and static condition. Successfully performing these rites and trials rewards the character with the means to become more powerful, but another way to interpret this is purging the body of weakness. (What is left is rarified, a more perfect being.) The appearance of the avatar body remains the same, but what it can do - its capabilities and capacities – changes dramatically over the course the experience. Experience accrues for the next level, which blesses the character with a more robust body and opportunities to improve or gain new abilities, while enchanted objects further enhance the body and skills. These rewards and changes earned through quests and combat in turn affect how the avatar (and thus the player) experiences the game. Avatars gain more capability to act in the

world, with increasing amounts of hit points, mana, attributes, and abilities. This greater capacity nullifies many of the spatial controls enacted on the body; the avatar can move with greater speed, but also with greater immunity to the physical dangers that delineate appropriate and taboo spaces. The capacity the avatar possesses to be affected by the environment decreases as it gains the capability to overcome the spatial controls imposed on its body.

CHAPTER 5

THE CHTHONIC POETICS OF EMBODIMENT

5.1. Summary

The underworld has appeared widely in video games throughout their history. This presence occurs in games across genres and audiences, indicating that underworld elements are not just used for shock value but offer formal sympathies with digital game structures and experiences. This formal relationship can be expressed as a chthonic poetics involving the spatial construction of meaning, ritualized interaction, liminal states, and narratives of trial and challenge. Embodiment binds these elements together; they are unintelligible without this core perspective. Consequently, I have initiated my study with this comparative discussion of embodiment in mythic underworlds and video game worlds.

Chthonic embodiment reflects how bodies in the underworld experience that space. Three primary forces acting on the agency, subjectivity and control of the body structure that experience, which in turn reflects the ways of being that emerge from chthonic contexts. By incorporating these forces into their gameplay and narrative structure, games provide more direct access to the mythic power

associated with the underworld than previous media forms. The player moves through the game world via the avatar, whose capability and capacity embodies the player's experience of that world. Legacy media such as paintings or sculpture put the audience in the role of spectators viewing representations of embodied experience, without any subjective experience of that embodiment. In Dante's *Commedia*, we read about the trials that the penitents undergo in order to move through Purgatory. In *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, we personally endure the ritual ordeal through the landscape as we grind and level. The audience perspective in game worlds is one of subject and interactor rather than mere spectator.

Throughout the discussion I've used capability to describe the relationship of the body's agency to the environment. It is the sum of the body's abilities, attributes, and skill; these determine the body's potential to move and act independent of the space. This is not necessarily a fixed attribute; it varies among ontological groups of bodies, and it may change as the result of ritual activity, as we have seen in Dante's chthonic world and in *WoW*. The earthquake and chorus of song that announced Statuis' completing his expiation of his sins of prodigality herald his new ability to move freely through the higher tiers of Purgatory. This ritual display is echoed in *WoW* by the golden light effects that anoint a character when it reaches the next level, with the added physical and skill capabilities that incurs. When capability is dynamic, it reflects the journey of the body to a transcendent state.

The discussion has shown that capacity, the second force acting on the chthonic body, often appears in inverse proportions to capability. This force is the subjectivity of the body; it describes the avenues and degrees to which the body can perceive and experience forces manifested by the environment. Capacity expresses not necessarily the body's weakness, but rather it reflects the body's receptivity to stimuli and intentions directed toward it. It determines the body's potential to be controlled by the space surrounding it. Changes in capacity affect the body's ability to overcome the spatial control mechanism imposed on it.

Control is the third force that structures the embodied experience in mythic underworlds and game worlds. It describes the organization and discipline imposed on the body, and its effect is mediated by the body's capability and capacity. The discussion has elaborated on how control is expressed through spatial structures and mechanisms that leverage the body's subjective capacity to position it temporally and spatially within the landscape.

5.2 Chthonic Embodiment: Connections between Dante's *Commedia* and *World of Warcraft*

The spaces of the Inferno and Purgatory manifest similar mechanisms of control but these bear different intentions when applied to the spirit bodies of the souls organized within the respective spaces. Thus, the souls consigned to Hell are

imbued with a great capacity to experience the ritualized torments that ritually commemorate their sins, and this capacity enables the sin to control them within their prescribed position in space. As the two spaces are inversions of each other's geography, so too are the mechanisms that discipline the bodies in their respective spaces. For the souls in Purgatory endure ritualized torment with similarly semantic meaning in relation to their sin, yet the result enhances their capabilities and removes their capacity to engage with the control mechanisms embedded in the spatial structure.

Like Dante's *Commedia*, the avatar's experience in *World of Warcraft* is the narrative of an imperfect body's transformative journey through an landscape that possesses both literal and symbolic geography. This liminal embodiment unifies the spatial metaphors and structures of the game. The gameplay and narrative goals focus on the body, but bodies in *WoW* inhabit their shared world in different ways. For the player avatar, the game frames a journey of purgation whose endpoint embodies the perfection of the spirit body. The character begins in a state of physical vulnerability and incompleteness, with little capability to control the space in which it exists but with an immense capacity to be controlled by it. The experience earned from enduring the ritualized trials re-makes the avatar's body - and thus its relation to the space - at symbolic thresholds at the successive "levels" of its being. The end of this journey results in a character that possesses quasi-divine, or perfect, capabilities that enable it to transcend the

spatial controls that had previously disciplined its body. At the same time, the body loses much of its capacity to experience the control mechanisms that had organized it in space. This echoes the contrast in Dante's Purgatory between the imperfect penitents and the souls who had successfully expiated their sins. The Sixth Terrace, for example, contains the gluttonous, who must walk among delicious fruit and clear water that cause their emaciated bodies to hunger and thirst. It is through this suffering that they "re-sanctify themselves" and purge their souls of their sinful incontinence.¹³⁶ Once they have perfected their souls, they are immune to the desires that played upon their bodies and bound them to that space. Thus we see the avatar's experience reflected in this progressive way of being demonstrated by purgatory souls, whereby their perfected souls manifest perfected bodies that transcend the physical forces that subjugated lesser beings. The other bodies, those not controlled by players, belonging instead to NPCs, mobs, and other creatures controlled by the computer, manifest a way of being without an escheton. In this regard, they display the infernal way of being, where action memorializes rather than processes the condition of the soul. These bodies, as well as the capabilities and capacities they hold, are disciplined by repetitive, ritualistic action that anchors them in their prescribed space, outside of time.

One of the goals of this discussion was to understand how bodies manifest and operate in imaginative – and inherently immaterial – spaces like mythic

¹³⁶ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XX

underworlds and game worlds. An analysis of embodiment in sample examples of mythic underworlds and game worlds has shown that a complex and interrelated dynamic of the body's capability and capacity works in conjunction with spatial controls to organize and discipline the liminal body in space.

5.3 Further Opportunities for Study

The relationship among virtual worlds, digital media, and underworlds is open to other directions of inquiry related to chthonic poetics. Mythic underworlds and game worlds like *WoW* have inspired significant bodies of creative output in traditional as well as digital media, and this work is a rich area of ethnographic study. In particular, looking at chthonic narratives and features in game world-inspired art may illuminate whether and in what ways digital media enables the remediation of pre-technological myths and narratives. Because embodiment is strongly informed by the spaces through which we move, the spatial architectonics of virtual worlds and mythic underworlds both deserve more attention. A similar opportunity exists in the interactive structure of virtual worlds; the software's procedural architectonics structures avatars' capacities and capabilities in the game world and needs to be included in the discussion. Looking at the problem area from another perspective, comparative analysis of embodiment across mythic underworlds can inform the perceptual models and interactive schemata implemented in game design. The connections between

mythic underworlds and game worlds, and with digital media in a broader context, offer research opportunities from diverse perspectives.

5.4 Conclusion

The body sits at the axis of experience in mythic underworlds – and game worlds like the one in *World of Warcraft*. It provides the medium through which we can experience these simulations as worlds rather than mere information structures. Other formal elements give context and direction to that embodied experience, and exploring how these interact with embodiment can expand our understanding of chthonic embodiment in virtual worlds.

The geography of underworlds is one such element, involving the topographic and significant features within an underworld, as well as the division and differentiation of the space. Cities are among these distinct, spatially symbolic geographic features; they concentrate power in both literal and symbolic ways. Another feature is the significance of axes and directional organization. The embedded symbolism in this spatial orientation enables inversion to be another significant feature in chthonic landscapes and construction of meaning.¹³⁷ This inversion occurs in axial organization, like the contrast between the Inferno and Purgatory, as well as in visual representation and theme of architecture, such as Dis and the New Jerusalem (or Undercity and Stormwind City). The spatial

¹³⁷ “And know that when a sin is countered by/ another fault-directly opposite/ to it-then, here, both sins see their green wither.” *Purgatorio*, Canto XX

organization of a world (under- or game-) intimately affects the bodies within it, and the discussion of chthonic embodiment has shown geography's instrumental role in controlling those bodies.

Narratives of journey and challenge are a second element tied to chthonic embodiment and geography, as the body is both the means of traveling through the space *and* the contested space that mediates struggles with physical and spiritual aspects. The challenges encountered as body moves through the physical space work through the body to purify the soul. This re-works the liminal body, involving the spirit body and soul of the underworld trope, as well as the avatar body in the game world. Purgation thus leads to the transcendence of the soul and the acquisition of a "glorified body."

Video games extend the imaginative space also occupied by mythic underworlds. The liminal body makes this immaterial space intelligible and navigable; the geographic organization and narrative structures associated with it use the ubiquitous body as the key to translating its symbolic meaning and the currency of ontological and narrative advancement within the world. The body provides access to the space and its meaning, but its abilities and limitations determine its experience of that world.

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